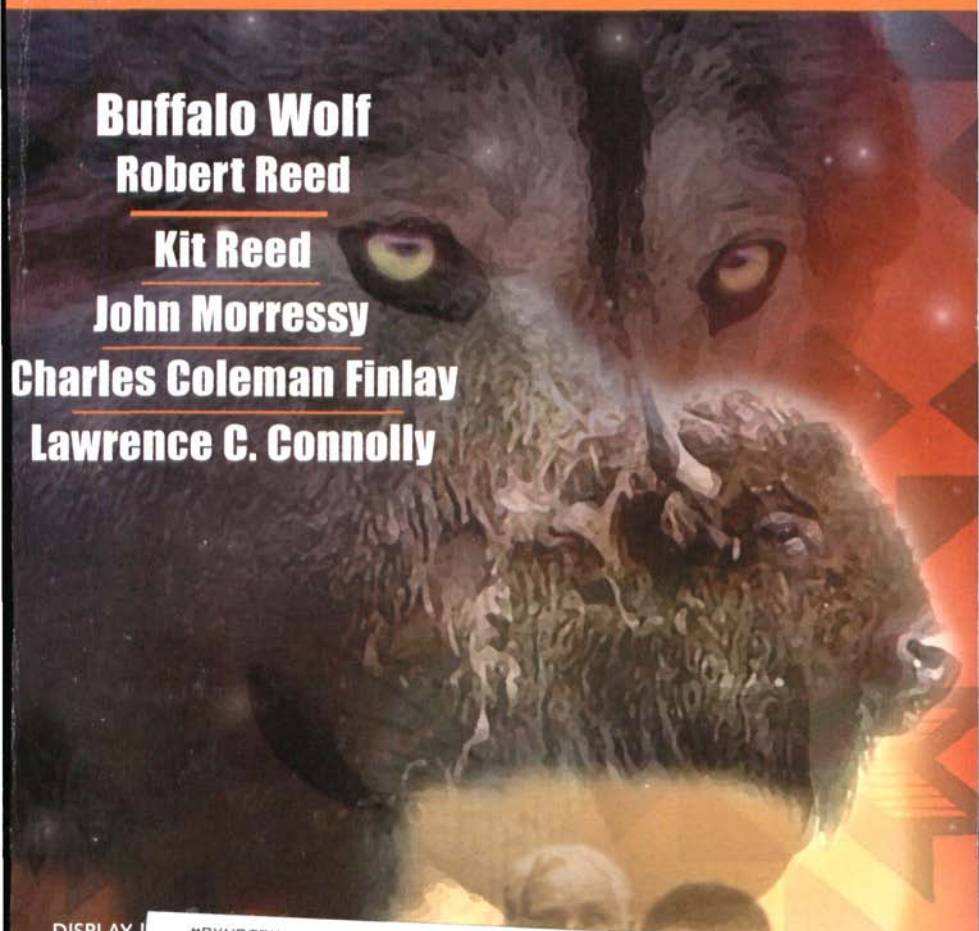
Dale Bailey: Hunger: A Confession

Fantasy & Science Fiction

MARCH

58370



Buffalo Wolf
Robert Reed

Kit Reed

John Morressy

Charles Coleman Finlay

Lawrence C. Connolly

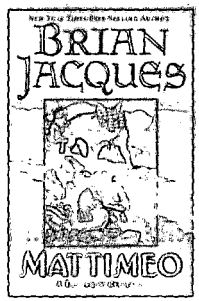
DISPLAY U
$3.99US $
#BXNBTBK ********** 3-DIGIT 440
#44047COLLIJ003# FS DEC03 S74 P3
MRS J COLLING
708 S STATE RT 193
JEFFERSON OH 44047-8498
0 71658 58370 2
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Where Fantasy Takes Flight!

"A marvelous science fantasy."
—Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*

"McKillip is a master storyteller."
—*Kirkus Reviews*, pointer review

"Mesmerizing, splendidly imagined."
—*Kirkus Reviews*



"A heroic adventure on the grand scale and in the grand style."
—Lloyd Alexander

An ALA Best Book for Young Adults
A *Booklist* Editor's Choice
A *Booklist* Top Ten Fantasy Novel
A New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age

"The telling is lyrical and magical, elegant in imagery, and memorable in characterization."
—*Booklist*, starred review

Firebird is an imprint of
Penguin Putnam
Books for Young Readers
www.firebirdbooks.com

FIREBIRD

LICENSED TO SCANZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
March • 54th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

BUFFALO WOLF 4 **Robert Reed**
FOR WANT OF A NAIL 52 **Charles Coleman Finlay**
DECANTING OBLIVION 130 **Lawrence C. Connolly**

SHORT STORIES

THE RESURRECTIONS OF FORTUNATO 43 **John Morressy**
HUNGER: A CONFESSION 81 **Dale Bailey**
VISITING THE DEAD 100 **Kit Reed**
SHUTDOWN/RETROVIVAL 116 **Aaron A. Reed**

POEMS

ee "doc" cummings 80 **elizabeth bear**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 34 **Charles de Lint**
BOOKS 38 **Elizabeth Hand**
PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS 95 **Paul Di Filippo**
FILMS 111 **Kathi Maio**
COMING ATTRACTIONS 160
CURIOSITIES 162 **Graham Andrews**

CARTOONS: Joseph Farris (33), Tom Cheney (42), Arthur Masear (129).
COVER BY MICHAEL GARLAND FOR "BUFFALO WOLF"

GORDON VAN GELDER, Publisher/Editor BARBARA J. NORTON, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor KEITH KAHLA, Assistant Publisher
HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor JOHN J. ADAMS, Editorial Assistant

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 104, No. 3, Whole No. 615, March 2003. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $3.99 per copy. Annual subscription $44.89; $54.89 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Periodical postage paid at Hoboken, NJ 07030, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.
Copyright © 2003 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
www.fsfmag.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robert Reed lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. For several years he has been our most prolific contributor, and the fact that our last three issues contained no new stories by him is rather remarkable. (He swore that the birth of his first child last year would not slow down his writing, but that three-month gap speaks for itself.) His latest story continues the saga of Raven, begun in "Raven Dream" in our Dec. 2001 issue. You might recall Raven is a Native American boy who lives in a close community apart from the outside world. Be warned that not all is as it first seems to be in these stories...

Buffalo Wolf

By Robert Reed

SHORT-HAIRS HAD TINY souls that hid in the darkness behind their big foolish eyes. They were the largest animals of the world, and they were nothing but weak, legs stubby and their bodies round, every muscle sick with veins of warm white fat. Touching a short-hair was easy. They were trusting and as placid as still water. But killing even one of the beasts was normally forbidden. Blue Clad held claim over the short-hairs. He was the great demon who lived downstream from the world. In the spring, he would set the animals loose to eat the good grass, and when they were fat enough and slow enough, he would carry them away, and other demons killed the short-hairs for him, and still other demons gave him fancy charms for the honor of eating all that fat and weak and very foolish meat.

Raven knew all about short-hairs, and in times of famine — with Blue Clad's permission — he had helped to turn a few of them into bone and rawhide and piles of deeply buried shit.

Beyond the world, in every direction, lay the spirit realm. About spirits and demons, Raven knew very little. But Grandfather was teaching

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him more every morning before sleep, and every evening before Raven and the other young men went out into the world to hunt. The old man was teaching him the demons' tongue and how to fool a demon, and how to resist a demon's ways, and what a good man needed to do to live well in any world.

Raven was in his eighth year and old enough to hunt alone.

During the long nights of autumn, a sturdy boy could march halfway across the world. On this particular night, Raven followed the river upstream. The world ended with a perfect line of tiny dead trees running from summer toward winter, three bright metal ropes fixed firmly to each tree. With a finger, he touched the highest rope. "Wire," he said, practicing the demon word. "Fence," he said. And then, "Fence post." Sharp slivers of metal were tied into the rope. "Barbed wire," he said carefully, pushing his finger against the sharp point. "Blood," he said, sucking the wound. Demon words were ugly and very simple, and he practiced them every night. "Spear," he said, aiming his weapon at the sky. "A long, strong spear." He touched his belt and the demon knife riding in its hilt, saying with an easy pleasure, "A sharp steel bowie knife." Then he took hold of the demon eyes riding on his neck, and with a voice that was a little less practiced, he said that very odd word, "Binoculars."

Raven's uncle — a great traveler named Shadow-Below — had brought the demon eyes home as a spoil. And then the man left again, for good. But his eyes remained behind, and for many reasons, the boy used them now.

Leaving the river, Raven walked straight toward winter. In whispers, he practiced his new words, and he strung old words into fancy sentences. "I need some money, sir. To call my mother, please." Grandfather had tried to teach him what the words meant, but he still thought of money as being just another kind of magical charm, and how it allowed a boy to call his mother was a deep and possibly eternal mystery. "And I wouldn't mind a little something to eat, sir. A hamburger, maybe?" Whatever that was. "Or maybe just a few Oreos, sir? Please, please?"

A hunger pang rumbled through him.

Raven had climbed the long bluff overlooking the river. "North," he said, staring toward winter. Then he turned and said, "West." And again, he turned. "South." And again, saying, "East," while looking toward dawn.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The stars were being softened by the first faint touch of sunshine. For a little moment, he knelt, using the demon eyes to search for any trace of deer. There was none. Then he looked into the sky, watching one of the winged machines racing away from the sunrise.

When Raven stood again, he saw the world with fresh eyes.

On the backside of the bluff, six posts along the fence, the wires had fallen into the grass. The seventh post was shattered at its base and laid flat. Something strong had pushed its way out of the spirit realm. Something enormous. On quiet feet, Raven stalked the damage, feeling perfectly awake, alert, and just enough scared to enjoy it. In the pouch on his belt was a tiny demon torch. Using the yellow light, he examined the sandy earth. Hoof prints showed him the recent past. With his sore finger, he touched the clearest print. Then he stood and began to run, following the intruder across the tall brown grass.

It was a short-hair, he assumed. A big bull, since only bulls could be this large. There must be a ripe female somewhere close, and she was pulling him along by his stupid little balls; Raven thought that way until that moment when he saw what he was following.

In the next instant, he heard his grandfather's voice, deep and steady. "Believe nothing about what you cannot see," Raven heard. "And what you can see is worth even more suspicion."

By the time Raven ran home, the Sun was beginning to rise.

All the people in the world were sitting on the cold ground outside, eating a little something before sleep. With a running voice, the boy described what he had discovered. He got down on all fours, grunting and pawing at the earth. His audience was a little excited but mostly skeptical. When Raven named the animal, the only response was doubtful grunts from several adults.

Grandfather showed no reaction. With his good arm, he took hold of his long white hair, and he tugged a few times as if coaxing his head to think. Then with a calm, practical voice, he said, "If it is, it is. But this is day, and we must sleep now. The beast, whatever it is, will have to wait for us."

Animals were patient, but not boys. The delay was painful for a boy who had to lie in his bed, in the darkness beneath the river bluff, counting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his heartbeats, wishing against nature that the Sun would set early and he could lead the other men to this marvel. What was the creature doing here? Where had it come from? To his grandfather, more than once, Raven asked, "Is it some kind of sign?"

"Most everything is some kind of sign," the old man replied.

"But what does it mean?"

Grandfather shrugged, his bad arm hanging limp at his side. "Nothing," he said with confidence. "Until we know something, it can mean only nothing."

Finally darkness fell and the world's men left home together to hunt. They worked their way down the wooded bluff and across the river, slipping into the hills and little valleys up near winter. The world was an enormous place. It had to be vast, since the land had to feed and clothe the sixteen People. Finding a single beast was work. Much of the night was finished before a young man named Rain-In-Water went into a little valley and came out smiling. "Tatanka," he declared with an easy glee.

"I told you," Raven blurted.

"Unless this is a different tatanka," the man cautioned. "Which would make it my discovery only."

Could there be two of the mythical beasts? The suggestion caused a rain of opinions that didn't end until Grandfather said, "Enough." Then everyone was watching him, and he said, "Let's kill this tatanka now. Before it wanders off, or dies of old age."

Together, they stalked the great animal. It was a huge bull, dark and nearly as big as a hill. Even lying on its belly, sleeping, it seemed huge. And where a short-hair would have let men come close, this animal smelled them in the shifting winds and instantly leaped to his feet, ready to flee.

Rain-In-Water used his spear, flinging it hard from a dozen paces.

The animal grunted and turned toward the pain, and three more spears burrowed into his side. Then in the next moment, with impossible speed, he was running, spears dropping away and the powerful legs churning, that great hill of muscle and horn charging for the nearest ridge.

Raven found himself closest to the animal.

With a practiced voice, he said the demon word. He said, "Buffalo." That single word had a magic, a tangible power. With that word, hadn't the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

demons slaughtered the great herds? Clutching his spear, Raven readied himself, imagining the sharp blade plunging between the ribs and rupturing the heart. With perfect confidence, he stood in the tall grass, watching the buffalo coming, and when the world seemed fill with thunder and the grunting deep breath, Raven closed his eyes and threw his spear and opened his eyes again in time to watch the spear dive deep into the earth behind the great buffalo.

A withering shame took hold of Raven.

In the next moment, there was an explosion. A black blast left the night torn open, and the buffalo ran another two strides before he realized that he was dead, and he dropped to his belly and lay still.

Grandfather had a demon gun pushed against his good shoulder, one bare foot holding the barrel still and straight. With his good hand, he worked the handle, planting a fresh cartridge inside the smoky chamber. But the buffalo was dead. There was nothing to do but look at his grandson and shake his head, mentioning only to him, "You have eyes. Trust them before you believe in your pride."

THERE WERE NO MARKS burned into the buffalo's hide, nor slick tags pinned to the ears. The animal hadn't belonged to Blue Clad or any other known demon; that was what most of the men decided, speaking in happy hushed voices. Then they set to work, cutting out the tongue and skinning the carcass, slicing away the dark muscle and sweet rich guts. The women and girls came to help clean and carry. But even with all those hands, there was too much to do in what remained of the night. The Sun rose, and they kept working at the treasure. The strongest men carried off the last of the meat, and the women buried the white bones. With the Sun climbing into a cold blue sky, Raven's mother stood beside the basket of ribs, using a demon's axe, chopping at the shaggy black neck.

"The brain is a treat," she promised.

Raven and his brother watched, ready to fight for the honor of bringing home the skull and brain.

"This is a wonderful day," she told them, and herself.

Even in death, the buffalo's eyes had a presence. This was no short-hair. His soul was large and vibrant, and even now, Raven could feel that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

soul hovering close by, wishing for life again, not yet accepting what had come to pass.

The axe made a hard thunk.

Mother stopped and dropped the axe, and then called out in alarm.

Grandfather was sitting on the ridge, watching the world. By the time he arrived, Raven and his brother were hunkered over the bloodied neck, staring at things they had never seen before.

"Look here," Mother said.

"Stand back," Grandfather warned.

But Raven was trying to make sense of the little wires and the patches of shiny stuff, like fish scales, woven against the animal's thick spine.

Again, Grandfather said, "Stand back."

Raven obeyed grudgingly, asking, "What does this mean?"

There was no answer. For the first time that Raven could remember, the old man seemed terrified, his tooth-starved mouth pulled shut and his dark eyes gazing up into the empty sky.

It was Mother who said it.

Quietly, fearfully, she said, "This is a tatanka, but it is a machine too. A demon's machine." Then as she started to dig a hole, intending to bury the soulless head, and while the sand flew, she turned to her sons, crying out, "Run away. Now. Save yourselves! Now!"

If a demon came searching for his lost machine, nobody saw him. The People remained hiding, and feasting, and there was no good reason to leave the underground. For days and nights they ate their fill of meat and vitals, and the women cut through the uneaten meat, searching for other bits of machinery. None were found, but just to feel sure, they purified the meat and everyone with proven charms. Grandfather invented new chants for this new occasion. And during the night, when nobody would notice the smoke, they dried what remained of the meat, saving it for times less sweet.

Autumn came to an end while they were feasting, a winter wind blowing in rain and then snow. Just enough snow fell to make the world white and simple, and the cold afterward was deep enough to make a boy wear his warmest clothes. It was night again. And still, no demons came searching for their strange machine, or the flesh that had been wrapped

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around it. Raven crept outside and scaled the bluff, and then just beneath the highest ground, he sat out of the wind, using his demon eyes to watch everything. In the cold air, the sky felt close. The world seemed tiny, and the stars were just out of reach, and it felt as though if he looked just a little harder, there wouldn't be any secrets anymore.

Winged machines pushed across the frigid sky, their voices growling. Toward summer stood towers of blue-white light, each tower rising from a place where hundreds and thousands of demons lived, in spaces too tiny to feed them. In secret, his uncle once told him the names of each tower, and Raven practiced them now. Where was Shadow-Below now? He had abandoned the People, and betrayed them. Yet the boy couldn't help but wish that his uncle were a little happy, living among the demons.

Again he looked high and saw a machine — a larger, more distant machine, without wings — and he studied it carefully while it crossed the sky directly overhead, never making the tiniest sound. Then he put down his demon eyes, resting them in his lap, blinking for a moment, and thinking, and when he glanced to his right, he saw the wolf sitting in the snow.

It was a white wolf, and enormous.

Raven had never seen a wolf. There were plenty of coyotes, both in the world and in the spirit realm. Red forest foxes lurked in the trees, and tiny swift foxes hunted voles in the grass. But in his long little life, the boy had only imagined what was sitting just a few paces from him. The creature was larger than three coyotes, with a great long mouth and teeth as big as fingers and vast, vivid eyes filled with a smoky light, exposing a soul that was at least as large as Raven's soul. It was a male wolf with massive forequarters and paws as big as a man's hands. In the absolute silence, the wolf breathed — a slow exhalation of lung-wetted air, a knot of steam hanging between them, and then some of that steam was inhaled again, the sound easy and relaxed. The wolf studied him. Briefly, it shifted its haunches, making the snow creak. If its eyes blinked, Raven didn't notice. Again, the wolf breathed. Then its head suddenly reared back, and the black nose sucked in the cold air, searching for scents, maybe, or maybe just taking pleasure from the dark winter night.

Raven thought of moving, and speaking. And then he thought of sitting quietly, exactly as he was doing now. Then it was some while later

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and the wolf stood, stretching suddenly with the entire length of his body. Grown men were not much larger than the animal. His strength and grace were woven into a magnificent body. He stretched again and took another slow breath, and then without the slightest care, the wolf began padding quietly across the snow, coming up to Raven and passing him, near enough to touch but never slowing, long legs carrying him up to the crest of the hill, and leaping over the tallest wire, vanishing easily into the spirit realm.

For a moment, the boy did nothing. The impossible had happened, or he had dreamed it. Unless the wolf belonged to a vision, which made it very important and very private. What should he do? His body answered for him. Suddenly he was standing, and in the next heartbeat, he was running, legs carrying him down the secret little trail that led home. While he ran, he promised himself to tell no one but Grandfather. But his brother, Snow-On-Snow, was standing outside, pissing into one of the pee holes.

"I saw a wolf," Raven blurted.

"A white wolf," he said.

Then too late, he asked, "Where's Grandfather?"

His brother laughed at him. He laughed as he dropped through the hidden door, and then as he strode into the smoky light of candles, telling everybody why he was laughing.

"Coyotes can be large," Rain-In-Water advised. "Particularly when they are close, and the boy is very scared."

Everybody was laughing now. Even Mother giggled, a little.

And then Grandfather came from his chamber. Having heard everything, he calmly suggested, "Perhaps we should ask the snow."

All the men climbed to the high ground. When they saw the tracks, an embarrassed silence fell on them. Then Snow-On-Snow remarked, "It could be a demon's dog. They get awfully big, sometimes."

A few faces nodded hopefully.

"There are no more wolves," Rain-In-Water argued. "They were killed before your father's father was born."

He was staring at Grandfather.

The old man nodded. Then he told the others, "Stay," and he went walking, backtracking the wolf for a little ways. When he returned,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

everyone was standing together, quietly discussing what was possible. It was said that some of the demons kept wolves as slaves. Or they crossed the beasts with their own stupid dogs, making abominations larger and more dangerous than either parent. But Grandfather didn't mention his opinions. Standing where Raven had been sitting, he pointed out, "You never heard this wolf walking up on you."

"No, Grandfather."

"And you didn't see him coming?"

"No."

"But you were paying careful attention to your surroundings. Because when you are outside, where demons might notice you — "

"Yes, Grandfather. I was being careful." Raven tried not to think about the demon eyes or his foolish skywatching. "It was very mysterious, how that wolf appeared all of the sudden."

The old man stared at his lying face.

Another man, Last-Year's-Grass, finally asked the most important question. "Was it a real wolf, or something else?"

Many somethings were possible.

Grandfather stood beside Raven. "You were the only one to meet this wolf," he pointed out. "What do you believe?"

"I think," he began. But he hadn't been thinking, really. It took Raven a long moment to pull his thoughts into the same sack, and out came one good answer. "I think it was looking for that buffalo. It followed the buffalo into the world, and it followed the scent of the meat to here. And then, it went away."

The other men nodded. A consensus had been found, and the boy felt proud and smart to be at the heart of it.

But then Grandfather threw his good arm over Raven's shoulder.

"No," he said. "That wolf of yours was searching, I think, yes. But for something other than buffalo."

Raven was bathing. It was a ritual cleansing, meaning there were little chants and charms that gave the ceremony its backbone, and it also was a means of disguise. He was using clean rags and a lump of perfumed demon soap, struggling to erase the smell of The People from his bare flesh. Hunched low, watching him from the opening of the chamber, was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his mother. She said everything with her silence and her worried face. A pretty woman with strong features and a girl's bright eyes, she had never doubted her father's wisdoms or made light of The People's beliefs. But now that her youngest son was preparing to leave the world, she had to stare at him and worry, her strong face looking a little old in the yellowy light of a demon torch.

In his eighth year, Raven didn't appreciate having his mother staring at his naked body. When he finished bathing, he said, "Look away."

"I'm your mother," she replied.

He shook his head. "Step back, Mother. Please."

She refused.

"What do you want?" he finally asked.

"Promise me," she said. "Promise that you will be very careful in the spirit realm."

"I won't be."

She stiffened, pushing her black hair up into the overhead beam. "I know you will be," she said. Then again, she said, "Careful."

Raven reached for a towel, his arm falling short.

"I'm traveling with Grandfather," he argued.

But that didn't help. She shook her head, and with a private voice admitted, "My father hasn't been young for many years."

"We will be fine."

She continued, telling him, "If something happens to your grandfather, you'll need to find your own path home. Remember that."

The words had a wicked effect on Raven. He had been making ready for this day for months now. Maybe the day had come early, but there were good reasons to trust the timing. The signs were obvious, if you chose to see them. His charms were strong, and he had been fed, and Grandfather still had two good legs. And besides, there was no time to wait. The wolf's tracks would start to melt in the morning, and by afternoon, nothing would remain of his passing.

Raven's nakedness didn't matter anymore. He climbed out of the metal bowl and grabbed his blanket, saying again, "I won't be careful."

He told her, "In the spirit realm, too much caution can be dangerous."

She stared at her littlest boy, and with a voice full of razors said, "But you will come home. Promise me that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm not my uncle," Raven blurted.

Wounded, she sighed deeply and finally stepped back from the little doorway. Her brother had been gone for most of a year now, and each day, in little ways, she missed him all the more.

Raven felt ashamed, both for thinking those words and saying them, but he couldn't make himself apologize.

Then with her saddest voice, Mother told him, "Shadow-Below was much stronger than you are. He was stronger than you can ever be. And that is the best reason, I think, for hope."

NOBODY ESCORTED THEM to the edge of the world. There were already too many tracks in the snow, and besides, nobody else had undergone the ritual cleansings. With Grandfather in the lead, the two of them climbed through the trees and stopped at the glittering barbed wires, and the old man said, "Raven," with a demon's tongue. "That will be your name now. And what is mine?"

"Grandpa Johnny."

"Say it again. But better."

"Grandpa Johnny," he said. And then like a demon, he said, "I'm hungry, Grandpa Johnny. Buy me a little snack, please?"

The wolf had leaped over the fence. They crawled under and then walked quickly alongside the wolf's tracks. The spirit air tasted the same as the world's air. But it wasn't, Raven kept telling himself. Under starlight, the paw prints were spectacular, and under a bare hand, they were cold. There wasn't more than half of the night remaining, and there was no guessing the distances they would have to cover. Grandfather was wearing one of Shadow-Below's heavy coats and his own pair of demon trousers, and Raven had on various demon clothes stolen over the years. Their stiff boots left demon tracks in the snow. If someone happened across their tracks, he might say to himself, "A man and a boy are out walking with their big dog." And perhaps, they wouldn't feel even a little curious.

Away from the river, the country was sand piled by the wind into long smooth dunes that had been covered with brown grass and fresh snow. Far beyond the horizon, from where summers were born, the towers of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

blue-white light stood tall in the very cold air. Raven knew enough about those places to feel curious, and he knew enough not to ask questions. But his mouth didn't listen. "Will we go as far as there?" he asked, naming the nearest tower.

Grandfather said nothing. They had followed the wolf up the next long dune, and then the wolf turned a little toward dawn, walking along the dune's wide crest.

"Then again," Raven volunteered, "I don't believe any wolf would want to visit there — "

Grandfather stopped and said, "Quiet."

Raven fell into an embarrassed silence.

"Your eyes are still sharp," the old man whispered. "What do you see?"

The boy started reaching for the demon eyes.

"No. Exercise your own eyes."

At first, Raven saw nothing. Then he stared out along the dune, and where it collapsed into a dry valley, he saw something. Many somethings. They were distant but tall just the same, thick and black and very straight, and against the fresh snow, they were mysterious and a little impressive.

"Fence posts," Raven whispered. "Very tall fence posts, I think."

The old man said nothing.

"Are they important?" Raven knew that Grandfather had come this way before. It seemed only reasonable to ask, "Is this a landmark?"

"I do not know," a soft voice whistled. "I have never seen this before."

The wolf had trusted the dune, walking it all the way to the end. The men trotted after it, and when they reached the mysterious fence, they paused. Each post was brown and smooth, too thick for a boy to reach around, and taller than two grown men. Strung between the posts was a new kind of wire. Raven thought of a blanket worn down to its sturdiest last threads, some threads running back and forth while others ran up and down. The wires were anchored to the ground, melding with what looked like an enormous white rope. The rope was laid across the sandy earth. The wolf had walked up and sniffed at the rope and wires and rope, and with the first brown post, he had taken a piss. Raven did the same, having fun trying to cover the wolf's scent.

Afterward, the wolf had turned toward dawn and trotted on.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They were following him again. "Did you come this way last winter?" Raven inquired. "When you were following after Uncle?"

Silence.

"You did walk this way," the boy decided. "And this fence is new, isn't it?"

Grandfather stopped. With a blade of brown grass, he tickled the new wires. The grass didn't catch fire. Then he knelt, using his bad hand to touch the big rope. If there were a danger, he wouldn't lose much. He explained that to Raven. But the rope did nothing to him, and with a soft voice, he said, "You touch it. What do you feel?"

The rope was as thick as a body, and the same as a body, it felt warm and a little soft.

They stood and started walking, as fast as possible, and Grandfather observed, "You and I are surprised. But the wolf...I think he already knows this fence...."

Raven tried to think.

"Do you see?" Grandfather asked. "Look how the ground is undisturbed. The grass, the sand. You've watched Blue Clad plant his little dead trees. You know what they do to the ground."

An angry machine planted the posts, piles of sand left behind.

"I was here," Grandfather reported. "Last winter, I walked this ground. And there was a little fence here. Nothing else."

"What kind of machine can plant this?" asked Raven.

Grandfather stopped, and after a moment's thought, he knew what to do. He pulled a heavy knife from one of his coat's secret pockets. Then after a few quick chants, he pushed the blade into the post, slicing until he was through what looked like bark. Then he sliced again, at a different angle, and a wedge of wood fell between his feet.

Raven picked up the wood and smelled it. He expected an odd odor — a demon stink — but what his nose found was ordinary and unexpected.

The wounded trunk was bleeding sap.

Grandfather touched the sap with a finger and tasted it. "Sweet," he announced. "And very warm, too."

"This is just wood," Raven offered.

"And this is just a tree," the old man added.

Then they were walking again, no more time to surrender.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Did you really grow here?" Raven asked the next tree.

The old man nodded, saying nothing now.

"So tall, and in just one year," the boy muttered to himself, in astonishment. "Alive, and still growing, and not a leaf to drink in the Sun, either...!"

They walked together, saying nothing, and when he couldn't stand the quiet, Raven asked, "What is happening here?" But Grandfather wouldn't answer him. Together, they held their pace, passing through another long silence. "What kinds of trees are these?" the boy suddenly blurted. "How do demons grow a fence? What does it mean for The People?" And again, he waited, the Sun lifting while they walked hard. Finally, with a loud exasperated voice, Raven asked, "Why won't you answer me, Grandfather?"

The smile was tired, the voice sorry. "Maybe I don't have any worthy answers," he replied, his good arm waving at the fence.

The land rolled like a sloppy blanket. Every valley was flat and dry, and the dune crests were warming, the snow melting wherever the Sun touched. But even on the bare stretches, the wolf was easy to track. He always walked beside the high fence. The big paws usually left the sand bothered. Once, a pile of cold scat lay in plain view. And without exception, the wolf's gait was steady but unhurried. He didn't know that he was being followed, or he didn't care. Unless he both knew and cared, and he was being careful not to make things too difficult for his pursuers.

The fence rolled with the land, cutting valleys and dunes in two. One long valley stretched toward summer, and in the distance, its floor was speckled black. The rising wind brought an animal's scent and a low sound that meant nothing. Then Raven looked through the demon eyes, and astonished, he reported, "I see buffalo. I can't count them, there are so many."

Grandfather watched the herd for a long moment and then handed back the eyes.

Raven danced where he stood. "The buffalo, and wolves...they are returning to us...!"

"Walk," Grandfather urged.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"This has to be a sign. A great sign." Raven spoke quietly, but quickly. His pace matched his voice, and as he hurried along, he said, "The demons are being driven away by the herd. The spirit realm is being made safe — "

"Slower now."

"The flood is falling, Grandfather! The demons are losing!"

The old man stopped, letting the boy walk on, talking his nonsense. Then Raven came back again, chastened by the example. He found his grandfather kneeling over a small hollow lined with dirty ice. In the hollow, curled up tight, the wolf had napped. Both could see where the head had lain, and the big front paws had rested, and how a dream sound or a real sound had caused the hind legs to kick, waking him suddenly.

With his good hand, Grandfather touched where the wolf had slept.

Raven did the same, the ice cold and smelling like something alive, a few stiff white hairs left frozen in place.

Grandfather stood and chanted, walking in a circle.

The new scat was sitting in the open. It was black and fresh, still looking a little wet in the morning light. Grandfather sniffed the air and looked up the next dune, and with a very quiet whisper, he asked, "What does this turd say to you?"

Raven picked it up.

"Warm still?"

"A little," he decided.

"Break it open. What do you see?"

"Hair. Tiny bones."

Grandfather nodded, expecting as much.

"It looks like a big coyote turd," Raven declared, a little disappointed. "He's eating mice and rats, I think."

"Lone wolves often do," said Grandfather, walking again. "Even a giant bachelor wolf has only the one mouth. Killing the buffalo would involve some very dangerous work."

"What does our wolf want? Back through the fence somewhere?"

"Perhaps. But I doubt it."

They were climbing the next long dune. Where there was snow, the tracks were sharp and clean.

"Wolves are not fools," Grandfather explained. "If there was a fence like this, and if the fence had a hole that let a buffalo and then you slip

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through...wouldn't you remember that hole and go back through again, when you were ready...?"

"He isn't ready yet," Raven offered.

For no reason, Grandfather stopped and set a finger on the boy's mouth. Then Raven heard the sound, steady and soft, and odd. It was a humming. A singing. It came from over the new dune, growing louder and then falling away again. Then all he could hear was the wind, and something else occurred to him.

Grandfather was climbing again.

"Where are the short-hairs?"

With a smile, the old man said, "I wondered when you would notice."

There should be hundreds of short-hairs on their side of the fence. Had the wolf scared them off? But Raven didn't see any flat piles of short-hair scat, and the grass seemed too long, unbothered by their stupid mouths.

Again, he asked, "Where are they?"

But then they came to the crest of the dune, and he saw what he had only heard before. The land before them was cut in two by a wide gray-black trail with a golden stripe down its middle. Without slowing, the wolf had walked down to the trail, and they followed him, walking beside those very fresh tracks. Then Grandfather said, "Hide," and they got down low inside a plum thicket. Raven turned his face away. He became still and calm, knowing how to vanish into the ground. The humming was coming again. It was louder this time, and closer, dragging a deep machine rumbling with it. A metal wagon charged past, racing toward winter. Then they slowly rose and came up onto the trail, each walking on one side of the wolf's tracks. Short of the trail, the living fence turned toward summer. A second living fence stood on the far side of the trail, keeping them from moving toward dawn. Where was the wolf now? They walked along the trail, Raven kicking at its hard face. But the only tracks were the wheel marks of one other wagon. The wagon had pulled off to the side and stopped, and then it had gone on again.

"He must have stayed up here," Raven decided. "On the trail."

"This is called pavement," Grandfather said, teaching him the demon word. "Asphalt. Concrete. A highway."

"How many names does it need?"

Grandfather listened to the wind for a moment. Then he suddenly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looked at the boy, asking, "What were you doing when the wolf sneaked up on you?"

Raven stiffened and turned cold.

"Watching the sky, were you? I think you were." With a grave disappointment, he shook his head. "But tell me this, and be truthful: What were you thinking while that wolf was busy sneaking up on you?"

With a quiet pain, Raven confessed.

Grandfather didn't say anything. Then after a little while, he nodded, and he said, "A wolf would never walk long on this kind of trail. He would turn and head back toward dusk again."

"But we don't see any tracks."

"Agreed."

They returned to the wagon tracks, and Grandfather studied them and the little pieces of rock that lay scattered on the pavement. Asphalt. Concrete. A highway.

"He found a ride," the old man decided.

"Who did? Our wolf?"

That brought a big smile, and a laugh. "I'm sorry, Grandson. I thought you understood what was possible."

ON A DIFFERENT DAY, they might have slept where they couldn't be seen, and with nightfall, they would have walked toward summer. That was the direction the wolf had gone. Five nights of hard walking would have brought them into a different country, where demons were plentiful and their lights reached high into the sky. But they were on a hunt today, and their quarry was moving fast now. That was why they moved back behind the plum thicket, and after a few wagons had passed, and after Grandfather had used the proper charms and chants, he decided, "We'll try the next wagon. Or the wagon after that. And do what I told you to do."

"I'll say nothing," Raven promised.

"But wear your sad face."

"Like this?"

"Not that sad. The demons will think I beat you."

The next wagon was enormous, loud and long, with many wheels that bit at the pavement as it fought to stop itself. There was a long, loud

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scream ending with a rush of air, and a door opened, and a demon dropped to the ground. He said, "Jesus, what are you doing out here? Don't damn well walk in the middle."

Grandfather said, "Sorry, mister."

With a bow, he said, "I wasn't paying attention. I guess I'm tired. We've been walking since before sun-up — "

"What are you doing, walking?"

"That's a story and a half," Grandfather promised. Then he waved toward summer — toward the south — adding, "We just need to get home. The boy's got school waiting, and I've got my own business."

The demon was small and fat. He studied them with his slow little eyes, making his decision.

Raven saw the demon's mind close up. "Please, sir?" he blurted. "My legs are hurting! Please?"

The demon paused.

Without anger or a trace of surprise, Grandfather agreed. "The boy's awfully tired, mister. And I have a little money. For your trouble, if you want it."

"No," the demon growled. "I don't want your money."

Then he climbed into the huge wagon and the other door opened, and from inside, he shouted, "Climb in. Make it fast."

Fooling a demon was easy. That was what Raven believed, sitting between the door and his grandfather, his rump and back resting against a seat nearly as soft as fresh pine boughs. The wagon had a little chamber in front, and it was high up, giving him a new view of the land. They were moving, and in the next moment, they were moving faster than Raven had ever moved. He tried not to seem impressed. He kept his sad face pointed through the glass, watching the tall fence passing and the rolling land behind it. Twice, he saw small herds of buffalo working at the grass. He saw a line of antelope against the horizon, their fast little bodies temporarily walking. Then he saw a bull elk and his harem — the first elk that he had ever seen — and that was too much.

"Grandpa, look," he said.

Grandfather was talking to the demon, asking what he was hauling. Whatever that meant. Then the demon was talking about lawn furniture and other things that didn't make the tiniest sense.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Look, Grandpa Johnny!"

The old man glanced at the elk and then at his noisy grandson. Then with a quiet voice, he mentioned to the demon, "This country is changing fast."

"Sure is." The demon nodded, and frowned. "There's talk about closing this highway. Merging these two big pastures."

Raven didn't understand.

"I passed through here last year," Grandfather confided. "These fences weren't here yet. I heard stories, rumors. That they were coming — "

Who was coming? Raven nearly asked.

"But I had no idea things would happen so fast."

The demon shook his head. "Yeah, it's something." One of his little hands rested on the wheel in front of him. Sometimes he let the hand drop, and the wheel drifted back and forth on its own. "They've been buying up the ranches for years. In secret, through these fake companies. Then when their new factories came on line, over the last couple years, the market for ordinary cattle just about collapsed."

The old man nodded, as if he already knew that story.

"I used to haul cattle," the demon continued. "A big part of my living, actually. But if you can grow steaks in a tub, why bother with the legs and the brains?"

"Sure," Grandfather said. "Why bother?"

"There's still a little market out there. Don't get me wrong."

Raven listened carefully, understanding most of the words but not much of their meaning.

"Some people want old-fashioned steaks and burgers," the demon explained. "But that's why they're doing the buffalo like this. They keep talking about making wildernesses and getting the land healthy again. But if they can trick people into paying to eat their buffalo burgers too...well, there isn't going to be one rancher left standing...!"

The silence was tense and close.

Finally, Grandfather sighed, admitting, "I don't pay enough attention. To news and stuff." He pretended to laugh, making a show of his bad arm. "I've been hurt. The last few years, I've practically been living in a hole."

"A few years," the demon growled. "That's all it takes, and it's suddenly a new world."

"I can see that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Suddenly, Raven said, "Wolves."

"Yeah, kid? You see them out there?"

He lied, saying, "I think so, sir."

"I don't doubt it. Yeah, they're bringing back all the old critters." The demon gave both of them a hard, appraising stare. "Of course, I figured you'd appreciate that. Having the herds back, and the wolves. The bears, and the rest of it."

Raven thought about bears.

"What's your name?" the demon asked.

"John," Grandfather lied.

"The boy?"

"Raven, sir."

The demon shook Grandfather's good hand. "Anything else you want to know?" And he laughed, admitting, "I'm not usually the guy who knows stuff. I like this, sounding like a library."

For a long moment, Grandfather said nothing.

Raven kept his mouth squeezed shut.

"So many buffalo," the old man finally purred, glancing at Raven. "Where did they all come from?" he asked the demon. "And so fast?"

The demon laughed.

Suddenly the wheel in front of him whistled, sounding like a bird. He grabbed the wheel up high and looked forward, and he kept laughing, saying, "The buffalo? They came out of the tubs, of course. Faster than nature, and twice as pretty!"

Raven slept.

He didn't mean to sleep. He just wanted to close his eyes for a moment. But the hard walking and the excitement had worn him down, and once he was sleeping, nothing could wake him. Grandfather had to stab him in the side, using a thumb. Then he was awake again, and embarrassed, and when he started muttering in The People's language, Grandfather stabbed at him again, asking the demon, "Are you sure? I've got a little money — "

"Keep it," the little demon said. "And thanks for the company."

On stiff legs, they climbed down to the pavement. The huge wagon gave a rumble and left them standing beside the highway.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Where are we?" Raven asked.

There were no fences. The dunes had vanished, leaving the country flat and bleak. But they weren't alone. On the far side of the highway was a shelter, white and low and surrounded by empty wagons. They started to cross, and with a warning tone, Grandfather explained, "This is a larger test for you. And for me."

Raven nodded.

"A happy face."

He smiled.

"Not that happy. Someone might ask why you are smiling."

Together, they passed into the demons' lair. The unnatural darkness was broken up with splotches of colored light. Raven smelled an odd smoke, and heat, and then he smelled food cooking. Suddenly, he was starving. His stomach roared, and Grandfather laughed. "Sit here," he told Raven.

They sat in a dark corner, a sharp-cornered table between them. Raven stared out at all the demons. He counted and counted again, just to be sure. Nine demons, more than he had ever seen before at one time. Most of them sat beside a long high and very dark table. They were drinking soapsuds. Smoke came out of their mouths. They smiled sometimes, but the smiles were sour and a little dead. A tall demon woman came from behind the long table, and she tried to smile, asking, "What'll you have?"

Grandfather was studying a piece of paper. His eyes ran along the marks, and then he told her what they wanted.

She touched a little machine with a little needle.

"Where's your phone?" he asked.

She pointed, and left.

"Just sit," said Grandfather. He rose and walked away, but he didn't go to the phone machine. Instead, he strolled up to the long table and sat between two demons — acting as if he belonged there, as if they had been keeping the seat for him. Then he said a few words, and the demons laughed. He told them something else, and they laughed again, harder this time. Then they talked to Grandfather. One demon talked, then the other. Then both spoke at the same time, laughing happily. And while everybody talked, they watched a little window set up high on the wall. The window showed marks. Grandfather had taught him about those marks. Each was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a number, and they had to be important numbers. Each time a new number appeared, the demons noticed and looked down at pieces of paper lined up on the tabletop. While they were busy and badly distracted, Grandfather pulled a paper charm out of a secret coat pocket, and he coaxed one of the demons into giving him more paper and a bright stack of metal charms.

The demon had been bewitched. One charm turned into many, and wasn't it marvelous?

The phone machine was stuck to the wall beside the door. Alone, the old man walked over to it.

To nobody, he started talking.

Raven was marveling at the magic of this place, this moment. He unfastened the top of a little glass and tasted the salt inside. Then he found the little tray full of paper sacks, and inside each was a clean white sugar. He was eating the last of the sugars when the tall woman came, carrying food on plates made of polished white bone, and she gave him metal tools wrapped in white paper, and with his very best demon voice, he said, "Thank you."

She smiled at him. "What's your name?"

"Raven," he said.

"Raven what?"

"Dream. Ma'am."

"Where you from, Raven Dream?"

Because it was true, he said, "Somewhere else."

"Oh, I could tell that," she said. Then she said, "You're a cute kid. Anybody ever tell you that?"

"Not today, ma'am."

"And you're funny. Like your grandpa is."

She left, and Grandfather came back smiling. He sat and they ate the cooked meat and the spongy white food wrapped around it, and Raven wiped his face clean with his hand, and then started licking his hand. Then Grandfather wiped both of their mouths with the paper, and he said, "Now we sit."

"How long?"

"I do not know."

"Did you ask anybody? About the wolf?"

Grandfather looked at him, in warning.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sorry." Raven dropped his eyes.

They kept sitting, and Grandfather gave the woman paper charms to let them sit longer. A couple of the men left. Another demon came inside and used the phone machine, and he left again. Then after a little while, Grandfather said, "With me. Walk."

Stepping outside, Raven asked, "Who was that demon?"

"Which one?"

"Who came in and left again?"

Carefully, the old man said, "That isn't for you to know." He was speaking in The People's tongue, impressing Raven with the importance of these words. "Now come over here. With me."

The day was ending, and the boy felt awake and happy.

With sweet pride, Raven said, "He hit the same spots that you hit. On that phone machine."

For a moment, Grandfather didn't seem to hear him. Then he turned, barely able to hide his astonishment. "How did you see that?"

"I watched."

"You watched me dialing, and you saw him dialing the same numbers?"

"I'd never seen anyone work a phone machine," the boy reported. "So I watched everything carefully. In case something happened to you, and I needed to repeat the same magic."

The wizened old face couldn't stop grinning.

"Now," Grandfather said. "It is my turn to impress."

They had stopped between two empty wagons. Grandfather knelt, and from behind one of the black wheels, he took a little ring on which were fitted pieces of intricately shaped metal. Then with one of the metal pieces, he opened the wagon's doors, saying to his grandson, "Now we crawl inside."

"This is impressive," Raven agreed.

"Yet this is nothing," Grandfather laughed. "I asked questions. I examined all of the signs. And now I think I know where we can find your wolf."

The wagon smelled a little sour inside, and its engine was loud and rough, a long black cloud spitting from the back end. But it moved with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

an easy strength, backward and then forward again. "Touch nothing," Grandfather warned. His feet were moving back and forth. Either his good hand or his bad hand was always holding the wheel in front of him, helping to steer. "This is an old, stupid machine," he explained, wincing when he used his bad arm. "It's not like that other wagon at all."

Raven nodded.

"Do you understand me?"

"Maybe a little," said the boy.

He didn't want to talk, or think. This was the spirit realm: There was too much to see, and every interesting thing was past before he could study it properly. Trees grew alone on little patches of pasture. Their leaves had fallen away for winter, but Raven recognized some of the trees just by the shape of their trunks and bare branches. Ash and cottonwood and burr oak were familiar. But others were new to him, looking too small or too frail to survive for long in his world. This huge flat country was crisscrossed with narrow highways, and there were always too many shelters to count. Some of the shelters had demons inside, and others had nobody, their doors and windows left open and the rooms inside stripped bare. The demons probably moved from shelter to shelter. When one shelter filled with trash, Raven decided, they could just pick up and walk to the next one. Then as the Sun dropped away, he watched all the great lights begin to awaken. The occupied shelters were lit from inside. Even brighter were the blue lights hung from the tops of tall poles, each making the ground beneath as bright as day. Demon wagons rolled along the highways, their own lights always looking angry. Beside the highways, now and again, were partial fences — tall poles with sloppy wires hung from the top. Raven studied the fences for a little while, and with a careful voice, he asked, "Do the wires carry juice?"

"Sometimes. Oftentimes."

The boy knew about juice. It was why Grandfather had put the grass blade against the other fence. Juice was dangerous, and the demons used it to keep short-hairs on the right pasture. Studying the tall poles, Raven had to ask what sort of monster was so large that it could be stopped by those very high wires.

Grandfather laughed at him, in a good-natured way.

"Later," he promised. "I will explain that mystery later."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Raven nodded and stared out into the gathering darkness, hunting for giants. Their little highway was climbing, and off toward summer, just before the horizon, wagons were moving fast along a different highway. They were like two rivers running beside each other, in opposite directions, each current swift and broad and staggeringly bright.

"How many?" the boy muttered.

"How many what?"

"In this world...how many demons are there...?"

Grandfather named a huge number, and then said, "Imagine a hundred piles, each with that many demons."

They might be talking about all the sand in the world.

Then after a little silence, Grandfather asked his own question. "Between us and that big highway, what do you see?"

"Darkness."

"Yet the land is rich. For all of my life, demons have planted it with crops, and lived on that land, and lived well."

Raven nodded, trying to understand.

"See the house? Just off the road?"

The house was low and built from red stone, shiny metal shelters set in a little woods behind it. Except for one little blue light out front, there was nothing there but darkness. Even racing past, Raven could see nobody lived there now.

"Where did they go?" he asked.

Grandfather shrugged and said nothing.

For a long while, neither of them spoke. The highway was empty most of the time, and rough, and the bright highway long ago vanished over the horizon. They were moving fast toward a point somewhere between winter and dawn. Raven watched the few stars that he could see from inside the wagon. He watched the dark lands, wondering if the giants had chased away the demons. And he studied his grandfather, seeing how he moved the wheel and his feet. "Is it hard, what you are doing?"

"Driving?" Grandfather said, "Not too hard."

"May I try?"

"Can your feet touch the floor in front?"

"No."

"Well then. I guess you cannot."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And then, quite suddenly, the highway brought them into another valley. There were little shelters and single walls with big marks on them, and more lights, and then the highway was straight and flat, nothing on either side of them but the night air. Grandfather worked his feet and the wagon stopped. Then wagon's lights fell asleep, and he said, "You can stay inside here, or you can climb out and look around."

The boy climbed into the cold air.

The highway continued straight, and then turned sharply toward dawn. Moving beneath Raven, moving with a strong familiar gathering of sounds, was water. He went to the edge of the highway, looking over a little ridge of stone. The reflected light of the stars defined the water and the very distant shorelines, and with a gasp, he asked, "What is this?"

"Don't you recognize it?" Grandfather asked. "This is our river."

But it was enormous, wide and plainly deep. When he had imagined the great oceans in the spirit realm, they hadn't looked much bigger than this.

"Go on," he heard.

Grandfather was still in the wagon. Leaning over, he had just pulled something small out of its hiding place. Then again, with an old man's grunt, he said, "Go on now. Walk on ahead."

"Why?"

"Or don't walk anywhere," Raven heard. "You are a man. The choice is yours."

Alone, Raven started to walk. He went a few paces and looked back again. The wagon was lit inside by a little light, Grandfather holding the small something in his bad hand, pushing at it like he had pushed at the phone machine. "This is very strange," Raven whispered to himself. But he wasn't scared. He told himself that he wasn't, and he believed it even when his heart was pounding and his breath came in shallow, quick gasps.

The highway reached the riverbank and turned downstream. Raven turned with it, walking a little ways, unsure what his eyes were seeing. One moment, he thought of an enormous shelter. Then he thought of giant trees standing close together. Then he blinked and saw a black cloud hanging low over the river bottom. He was busy staring at this dark mystery, and then came a roar, abrupt and enormous.

Raven whirled and dropped. A single brilliant light was coming

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around a bluff upstream, towing a loud machine that growled and suddenly screamed, sounding injured and furious; and in a mixture of panic and practice, he dove into the ditch beside the highway, letting the grass and weeds hide him.

The machine was slowing, and roaring, and following after it was a line of heavy wheeled machines. Raven felt the wheels turning and the ground shivering under the impossible weight. Then the light was past him, and he saw a second, weaker light playing across the grass above him.

A lifetime of experience let him dissolve into the land.

Motionless, barely breathing, he could hide forever. Or at least as long as it took a demon to give up his search.

That's what Raven was thinking as the big hand took him by the hair.

He screamed, and the hand lifted him off the ground, and the giant machines kept roaring and squealing. With one leg, then the other, Raven kicked at the demon. With his hands, he reached for the knife hiding in one of his secret pockets. Then the demon grabbed both of his arms, and Raven kicked with both feet, driving his boots into a hard, ready belly.

"Enough," the demon shouted.

He used the language of The People.

Then Raven was thrown into the soggy grass deep in the ditch, and standing over him, using a demon's voice, his uncle asked, "What the fuck are you doing? What the fuck are you even thinking?"

SHADOW-BELOW HAD CUT his hair short. He was strong, as always, and heavier than Raven remembered. His clothes were dark blue, and there was an important piece of metal pinned to his chest. He was angry and a little scared, but mostly, he was trying to appear brave and certain. "He shouldn't have brought you," Uncle said, never mentioning Grandfather. "This isn't going to work, you know. I'm not coming back. I'm not living in a hole in the ground anymore."

"Then you're a demon," Raven muttered.

"I am not," Uncle declared. Then in the next breath, with a forced laugh, he said, "Or maybe I am demon. I don't care, either way."

The boy studied his surroundings. The two of them were sitting inside a long narrow shelter set on fat wheels. The lights were off. The air

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was warm, smelling of cooked meat and soiled clothes. Through the window glass, he could see the chain of giant machines moving very slowly now, carefully balanced on a pair of little metal ridges. The first machine was moving inside a great chamber, and some kind of hand was reaching from the ceiling, calmly lifting the machine with a strength that he couldn't begin to imagine.

Suddenly, his uncle was laughing.

"You know, he left the world, too. For several years, when he was about my age. He came down here and worked in the slaughterhouses, and drank beer, and all that bullshit. Did you know?"

"No," Raven confessed.

"Your mother was born in the spirit realm. Did you ever hear that?"

"No."

"And then I was born, and he got his arm busted in a bar fight, and he might have killed some big demon, and that's why he returned to the world. With me. With your mother. But not with your grandmother, no."

Raven couldn't speak.

"He's got no business, using you." Uncle had some little machine, and he said, "I can hide your trespassing here. Give you another identity. Something. I'll think of something."

What was he saying?

"I'm happy here," Uncle reported. "I get enough to eat. I can read. Fuck, I can actually shower and date and get a paycheck." Few of those words made any sense.

"Happy?" Raven repeated, with a doubting tone.

Shadow-Below shook his head, chewed at his lower lip, and then said, "It was a great idea, once. But everything's changed. The world is getting remade, and it's mostly for the better...and I don't see why I need to be bothered by you, just because I don't happen to agree with the old shit...!"

"What is that?" Raven asked. "Out there...what is it...?"

Slowly, Uncle realized that a question had been asked. He looked up from what he was doing, and with a low snort, he explained, "It's a project of theirs. A city. A new city built with all the new technologies. New magic. Whatever you want to call it." He tried to work again, but his concentration faltered. "You can't see much from here, and I'm not showing you any more. So don't even ask."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I won't," Raven promised.

Uncle turned in his seat. "It's organic," he explained, staring outside. "That train? They built it in Wyoming. From scratch. The engine is melted down here, because the city needs a certain amount of metal. Just like plants and people need metal to grow right. And the cars are pure coal. Except for the wheels, which are a tough plastic. The train is built and sent, and since we don't need coal for power anymore, it's cheap to buy. It's the natural raw material, and the whole train is taken in and eaten and made into the newest parts of this city."

Raven looked at his uncle now.

But the man didn't notice. With a strange little voice, he said, "Don't get me wrong. It's good to see you again." He was staring at each machine as it was being pulled inside. Another giant arm would drop and pick one up, lifting it away into some brightly lit but hidden corner of the half-born city. "Are you doing okay up there? In the world?"

"It's been a good year."

"Blue Clad still holding onto his ranch?"

Raven wasn't sure how to answer. Did he even know enough to volunteer an opinion?

"He's a tough, smart demon," Uncle declared, with an odd hope.

A pride, even.

"Maybe you'll come home again," said Raven, just a little touch of hope in his quiet voice.

Uncle stared at him.

"A lot things are maybe," he said. "But almost none of it ever happens."

Raven nodded, dropping his eyes.

"There's just one thing certain," Uncle said to him. "You are leaving. Right now."

"All right."

"And don't even think about staying with me."

Had Raven been considering that?

"Because it wears at me enough, my leaving the world. I don't want you riding my conscience, too."

Uncle took him as far as the river, and then turned and started walking back toward his wheeled home. If he were planning to look at Grandfather

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

waiting in the car, he would do it secretly, when he was out of sight.

Twice, Raven said, "Good-bye."

Once as The People would, and the second time as a demon would say it.

"Yeah," Shadow-Below replied, with the demon's tongue. "You two get home safely, if you can."

"We will," Raven promised.

Then he ran, without haste but with a steady purpose. As he approached the wagon, Grandfather started the engine again. Again, the smelly black smoke filled the air, and the rumbling felt like a great sick heart beating.

Raven climbed inside.

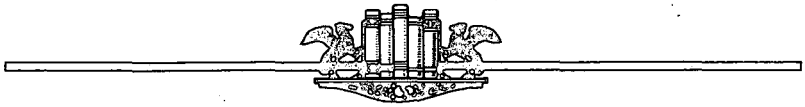
Grandfather turned on the front lights and gave him a long look. Then he started to turn the wagon around, and when they were going forward again, using a soft, almost respectful voice, Grandfather asked, "Did you find your wolf?"

"Yes," said Raven.

Then after a little moment, he added, "And I found my uncle, too."

"I give up."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Briar King, by Greg Keyes, Del Rey, 2003, $23.95.

THE GOOD thing about high fantasy is that whenever you think it's pretty much been beaten into the ground, someone like Greg Keyes comes along to prove that those old familiar settings can still be successfully reworked. The secret is in the characters. Even if they're archetypes, they still need to be individual to come alive, and this is something that Keyes obviously knows because the characters in *The Briar King* absolutely brim with life.

There's the King's holter (forest ranger), Aspar White, pragmatic and efficient, even when confronted with the impossible; the naive would-be monk, Stephen Darige, who quickly learns humility at the hands of both White and the monks of his order; Princess Anne, the youngest of the King's children, who proves that fairy tales and fables can prepare one for the real world; the stalwart young knight, Sir Neil MeqVren, who learns that different politics rule in the court and the battlefield; the charming and dashing swordsman, Cazio Pachiamadia da Chiovatio, on one hand a rogue, on the other a man of great honor.

And there are so many others, including the mysterious Green Man-like title character, the Sefry who seem to be some combination of elves and Gypsies, and otherworldly creatures such as the Greffyn. Even Keyes's walk-on characters are of interest.

The plot doesn't lag, either. Whether it's political machinations, a duel, or a quiet conversation, there's always forward motion and the reader never loses interest.

What I liked the best is that here is a high fantasy novel that has the grit of secular combat and the heart of one of the great Romances, but it hasn't forgotten one of the main reasons we turn to fantasy: a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sense of wonder. Yes, there are battles and campaigns and political maneuvering, but there are also marvels invoking awe and mystery.

And happily, while this *is* the opening gambit of a new series by Keyes, and obviously storylines trail from it into the book that will follow it, *The Briar King* does come to its own satisfying conclusion. In other words, there's no cliffhanger and then a year-long wait to find out what happens next.

It's been a while since I was this taken with a traditional fantasy novel, but Keyes hooked me from the first page and I'll now be eagerly anticipating sitting down with each future volume of the *Kingdoms of Thorn and Bone* series as they are published.

Boneyard Volume One, by Richard Moore, NBM Publishing, 2002, $12.95.

Michael Paris has inherited a cemetery — Raven's Hollow Boneyard, to be exact — and discovers that this inheritance immediately puts him in the middle of a conflict between the residents of the nearby town of Raven's Hollow and the residents of the cemetery.

What's that, you ask? What residents? It's a graveyard, after all. Well, yes. And its inhabitants are mostly dead. But that doesn't make them incapable of wanting to defend their homes. Creepy though they are — including a werewolf in shades, a rather sex-crazed amphibian-woman, talking gargoyles, an animated skeleton, and oh yes, a really cute vampire named Abigail — Paris soon finds himself siding with them, and that's when the trouble really begins.

Boneyard is only moderately creepy. What stands out more is the humor, the wonderful characterizations, and the art. Okay, I admit it. I cheated in not letting you know right from the start that this book collects the first four issues of Moore's ongoing black and white comic book, but I was hoping to pique the interest of those of you who might otherwise pass over the review without even noting what the book is about.

For lovers of oddities and fantasy, the black and white independent comic field offers a wealth of wonderful material — if you can get past the idea that good stories can also be told in an illustrated strip format. Try *Boneyard*. Or one of the many other high quality series also collected in books such as *Charm School*, *Castle Perilous*, *Bone*, *Strangers in Paradise*...I could go

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on for pages, there are so many good titles. Just try one. If you do, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised.

It's rarely easy to limit this column to three or four recommendations. This month I thought I'd forego a longer review so I can at least let you know about the existence of some of the wonderful material that has shown up recently:

Alex Irvine's *Rosetti Song* (Small Beer Press, 2002, $6) is a four-story chapbook that makes an excellent introduction to the extended stylistic and subject palette of Irvine, occasional contributor to this very magazine and the author of a deliriously good debut novel, *A Scattering of Jades*. Two of the stories, in fact, appeared in *F&SF*, including the title story, an enchanting combination time puzzle/ghost story. Of the other two pieces, one appeared in *Starlight 3*. The last, and only original piece to this mini collection, is "The Sands of Iwo Jima," a fascinating meditation on memory and how we fit into our environments.

While not a high-end production, *Rosetti Song* is certainly a handsome one with simple, effective graphics on the cover and a well-designed interior. And you can't beat the price: $6 for a signed chapbook? It's a steal.

Admirers of Brian Froud's fairy art will enjoy the latest installment of his Lady Cottington books: *Lady Cottington's Fairy Album* (Abrams, 2002, $25). Yes, it's more paintings of squashed fairies (although, as usual, we're informed that no fairies were killed or harmed in the making of this book), but they're beautifully rendered and the accompanying text and photos are great fun.

A companion CD is also available separately. *Faeries* (Windham Hill, 2002; $18.98) is a collection of electronica/ambient instrumental and vocal tracks that's remarkably good for a project such as this. No surprise, since it includes material by Michael Hedges, Cirque du Soleil, Nightnoise, Delerium, and other popular (I hate to say it, but I can't think of a better term) New Age artists. Stick it in your computer and you gain access to an art gallery, a video interview with Froud, and a short animated film. The sixteen-page CD booklet reproduces a number of paintings and includes text by Neil Gaiman.

And speaking of Gaiman, DC Comics continues to plunder the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

long-dead Sandman series, this time with *The Sandman, King of Dreams* (Chronicle Books, 2002, $15.95), a collection of forty postcards featuring art from the comics, trading cards and the like. Nothing particularly new here, but the art still stands the test of time and recipients of the cards you send out will undoubtedly enjoy them.

If you're a fan of Ray Bradbury's writing (and really, who among us isn't?), you'll have some fun with *Bradbury: An Illustrated Life* by Jerry Weist (William Morrow, 2002, $34.95). Consider it an illustrated biography with lavish reproductions of book covers, magazine illustrations, movie stills, letters, scripts, and so much more. It's one coffee table book that will stand up to multiple viewings.

***

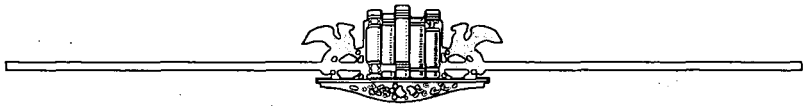
Lovecraft at Last (Cooper Square Press, 2002, $28.95) is another oversized book, this one detailing the correspondence between H. P. Lovecraft and Willis Conover who began corresponding with Lovecraft when he was fifteen. If you're at all intrigued with Lovecraft's complicated mythos, you need this. The book includes facsimiles of the correspondence and some photos and illustrations, but the real attraction here is "listening in" on Lovecraft's informal observations on his work as he writes to the youthful Conover.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

BooksNow

To order these books, (24hrs, 365 days) please call (800)266-5766 (Ext. 9500) or visit us at www.clicksmart.com/fsf

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Books

ELIZABETH HAND

Things That Never Happen, by M. John Harrison, Night Shade Books, 2003, $27 HC, $15 TP.

Light, by M. John Harrison, Gollancz, 2002 (U.K.), £17.99.

The Scar, by China Miéville, Ballantine Books, 2002, $18.95.

The Separation, by Christopher Priest, Scribner, 2002 (U.K.), £10.99.

Well you think you had a good time
With the boy that you just met
Kicking sand from beach to beach
Your clothes all soaking wet
But if you look around and see
A shadow on the run
Don't be too surprised if it's just
a paper sun.
—"Paper Sun," Traffic

Paper Suns

With the appearance of the collection *Things That Never Happen* and *Light*, a new novel, we seem to be having an M. John Harrison Moment. And about time, too. For more than twenty years, Harrison's work has anticipated the amphetamine buzz and bleak ardor of the early twenty-first century: it's just taken the world that long to catch up with him.

But now we have. An entire generation of writers has been influenced by Harrison or fallen somewhere within his remit; China Miéville, who provides a heartfelt and engaging introduction to *Things That Never Happen*, is perhaps the youngest and best known. Many of the stories in Harrison's collection have become classics, which seems a rather musty distinction to bestow on works that remain as edgy and disturbing as "Running Down," "The Incalling," "A Young's Man's Journey to London" (originally "A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium"), "The Horse of Iron and How We Know It," "The Great God Pan," "Anima," "Gifco," to name just a handful. I discovered

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harrison's work relatively late in life — not till I was past thirty — but fortunately rather early in my writing career. Since 1989 I have read and reread Harrison's stories, and can honestly say that they've taught me more about the craft of fiction than I've learned from just about anything else.

Harrison trained as an engineer when he was young, and it shows in the meticulous care he puts into constructing his tales. Not just the machine-work of what used to be called worldbuilding (a term that has always made me break into a rash; worlds, at least the ones we know of so far, aren't [and probably shouldn't be] built, at least not by *Homo sapiens)* but might better be described as world shaping; not just his characterization, which ranks with that of masters like Robert Stone or Graham Greene; not merely his prose style, elegant and devastating as a twenty-eight-gauge stainless steel garotte; not just his subject matter, which is nothing less than the mutable nature of our world (or any other), which we so foolishly believe we can apprehend and change. Harrison does all of these things, while at the same time giving readers a powerful sense of the author's own engagement with these issues, and with his own work: a great, almost immeasurable gift from an author to his readers.

Harrison's work seems (to me, at least) much in line with that of another cheerful observer of human experience, Arthur Schopenhauer. Critic Bryan Magee gives a nice precis of Schopenhauer's philosophy — that "the noumenon and the phenomenon are the same reality apprehended in two different ways — the noumenon is, so to speak, the inner significance, the true but inaccessible being, of what we perceive outwardly as the phenomenal world...they are two different aspects of the same thing, an inner and an outer, but one is not the cause of the other." Harrison's characters exhaust themselves with their efforts to perceive both these aspects of reality at once: it's as if they are trying, fruitlessly, to fit themselves with spiritual bifocals. For the most part, they fail utterly, or at best are driven to madness or despair by their attempts; but there is an undeniable exhilaration in reading of their struggles. Harrison is a longtime and obsessive rock climber, and one can easily draw parallels between the allure of works like Jon Krakauer's non-fiction account *Into Thin Air* (mountain-climbing and existential despair)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and Harrison's novel *Climbers* (rock-climbing and existential rapture, with a few bits of despair).

"The secret is everything until you know it too," Harrison writes in the Author's Notes to one of his finest tales, "Egnaro." It is a measure of M. John Harrison's generosity, and genius, that he continues to share his secrets with all of us.

Light, Harrison's first science fiction novel since 1975's *The Centauri Device*, is a taut, sleek, and often very funny space opera about the discovery and deployment of a quantum space drive. The three-tiered narrative begins in 1999, where a physicist named Michael Kearney is (mostly) unwittingly involved with the creation of the drive. Quantum physics at first seems to be a bit of a hobby for Kearney; his primary obsession is with an occult figure that he seeks to appease through ritual murders. Meanwhile, four hundred years in the future, a junkie named Ed Chianese is having some trouble paying off his suppliers and running into a bit of bother with the notorious Cray Sisters, and an interstellar pilot named Seria Mau is getting ready to open a mysterious box. The storyline is audacious and completely over the top; after a while its most extravagant aspect, the quantum drive itself, seems also to be the most believable.

Light almost functions as a Young Person's Guide to M. John Harrison — not Harrison Lite, but a sort of breathless Cook's Tour of the author's fictional concerns, from that unhealthy preoccupation with gray-faced magi manqués to anorexic women to cats to shady con men, necromantic killings, North London Noir, sex, and stuff that is way, way beyond sex: *Light* is the only space opera I can think of that gives off a shimmery erotic glow while dishing the dirt on post-quantum theory. Cheaper than a post-grad education in physics, and more fun, too!

Raw Power

In his intro to *Things That Never Happen*, China Miéville mentions reading Harrison's "Egnaro" when he was fifteen. "We should all be so lucky," I thought (and, "Well, this explains a lot."). I will admit here that I have not yet read Miéville's first two novels, *King Rat* and last year's award-winning *Perdido Street Station*. But, based on his most recent book, *The Scar*, I'd say Miéville is coming pretty close to pitching a perfect season. *The Scar* returns to the vast and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hallucinogenically imagined world of its predecessor, but this time the action moves from the febrile reaches of the city of New Crobuzon, to the febrile reaches of a floating city called Armada. The narrator, Bellis, is an unwilling conscript to Armada's population, and *The Scar*'s loose plot involves her efforts to escape and return to New Crobuzon. The notion of a floating city is delectable, but Miéville seems a bit uncomfortable away from dry land, or very, very deep water. The most gripping parts of *The Scar* are those that are set beneath the surface of various oceans: a gorgeous preface that takes place miles undersea; a fantastic battle with a gigantic bonefish; an absolutely wonderful, over-the-top sequence about the descent in a bathysphere to investigate an ailing, kraken-like monster called the avanc, a creature substantially larger than my hometown, which has been harnessed to tow Armada across the seas. This last gave me the same primal thrill I felt the first time I saw *Gorgo*, an experience I've spent decades trying to recapture. There is also a terrifying and extremely moving visit to the island of the anophelii, mosquito-men and -women whose cultural and sexual mores are beautifully detailed and described, though I felt that these chapters would have been better served if they'd been worked into a short story, rather than an onshore jaunt for the passenger-residents of Armada.

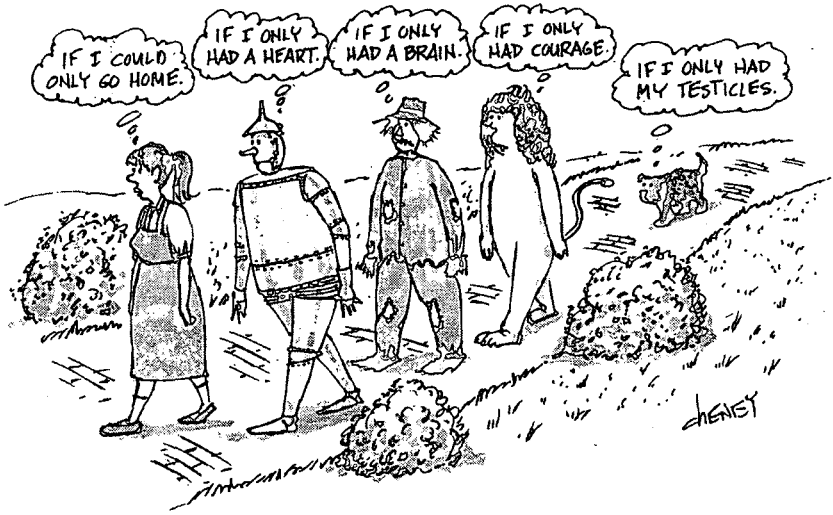
Still, for the most part, *The Scar* functions as a picturesque narrative, a tour de force that sometimes feels a bit like a prolonged march, or paddle, across an endless seascape. Miéville is a spectacular talent, but *The Scar* still feels like a young writer's book. Maybe a young reader's as well: I found its 600-plus pages, with their discursive rambles regarding Armadan politics, races, and intrigues, exhaustive and often exhausting. That beautiful, immense avanc seems like a nice metaphor for Miéville's extravagant gift as a writer. I am very interested in what he does with it next.

WWII Redux

Christopher Priest's exquisite alternate history *The Separation* is being considered as a film, but that shouldn't stop anyone from reading it now, before Absolutely Everyone is talking about it. *The Separation* is an exceptionally frightening novel whose nightmare power derives from its chilling, almost clinical

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

evocation of an historical reality with which we are all familiar, the London Blitz. Twin English athletes with a German mother, Jack and Joe Sawyer, participate in the Berlin Olympics in 1936. At a British Embassy reception following their event, one of the twins is approached by Rudolf Hess; later, both Jack and Joe help a young German Jew escape to England. What follows is a cliffhanger narrative of dual identities, betrayals, and shifting realities, as two versions of the twins' histories — and England's, and the world's — are woven together, like strands of DNA, to form a terrifying narrative. Priest has used doubles before to great effect, in his award-winning novel *The Prestige*; but *The Separation* trumps even that tale. Its chapters linger in the mind like scenes from a Hitchcock film, impossible to shake off; like Hitchcock's work, *The Separation* begs for repeated readings to appreciate the cold brilliance and execution of its intricate plot fully. A masterly novel that deserves to become a classic. ☙



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Edgar Allan Poe's Romantic and distinctive stories lend themselves readily to pastiche. Most such stories nowadays are comic or ironic in tone, often to good effect—remember Esther Friesner's "Poe White Trash"! Or "The Simpsons" episode modeled on "The Tell-Tale Heart"! Here we bring you a new take on "The Cask of Amontillado," one that isn't interested in laughs or in frights but rather in more contemplative pleasures.

The Resurrections of Fortunato

By John Morressy

FOR SO MANY YEARS, THE shards and splinters of the past lodged in my brain seemed not true memories but phantasms sent by the devil. But now my lost life has been restored in full. Better by far had it remained in darkness.

I admired Montresor in those days. In truth, I envied him. I could not have confessed it then, to myself least of all. Pride was one of my many faults, and pride would not permit me such an admission. But it was so.

He was the oldest of our little group, no more than a few years my senior, but he seemed much wiser than the rest of us. Somber in his dress, elegant in his bearing, he was a man of excellent taste, aloof and sensitive — oh, yes, sensitive, far more than we ever suspected.

We played the roles that all young men play before their companions. I was the prankster, the wit, ever ready for some mad adventure. He was the thoughtful one, the scholar, the observer who seldom spoke.

As we grew to manhood and took our places in the affairs of the city, we continued to meet. We often dined together. But I cannot in truth say

Copyright © 2003 by John Morressy. All rights reserved.
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that Montresor and I ever grew close. I do not think he had a single close friend. He was incapable of friendship, and yet he always spoke as though he and I were on the most intimate terms.

Outwardly he was ever gracious. But silently, inwardly, behind a façade of amity, he conceived and nurtured a great hatred for the house of Fortunato and for me in particular. I gave him no cause, but as I was to learn, none was needed. Proud as a lion of his name and lineage, Montresor was quick to imagine an insult where none was intended. He was a joyless man, more dangerous than any of us suspected because the darkness dwelt so deep within him.

Of his feelings I was unaware. I continued to treat him with the utmost cordiality. Those who knew us in those days — if any still live — will attest that I acted at all times with courtesy and never spoke slightingly of him.

I realize now that he was strongly influenced — one might even say obsessed — by the arms of the house of Montresor: as he described them to me, long ago, "A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are embedded in the heel." The motto was suggestive: *Nemo me impune lacessit.*

We met by chance that night of carnival. I was in motley, for a masquerade from which I had slipped away, bored and restless, and was roaming in search of whatever escapade I might chance upon. Adventure of every variety was to be found in our city at carnival time. I had drunk largely — another of my youthful failings — when I came upon Montresor, and hailed him with a heartiness I had seldom displayed toward him of late. He was cloaked in black, as was his custom, and presented a mournful figure amid the colorful crowds. He seemed quite overcome by joy at our encounter, and wrung my hand with excessive warmth.

We fell into conversation. I cannot recall our exact words, but I know that he mentioned almost at once his acquisition of a pipe of Amontillado. This surprised me. In carnival time, the true Amontillado was all but impossible to obtain. I said as much, and to my surprise, Montresor confessed to misgivings. Fearful of missing an opportunity, he had paid the full Amontillado price and was now beginning to doubt his good fortune. When we met, he was on his way to consult with old Luchesi.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Luchesi was a harmless idle fellow, a dilettante, nothing more, yet he considered himself an expert on Spanish vintages and his presumption piqued my vanity. In those days I prided myself on my knowledge of wines. I would not permit Montresor to place himself in the hands of a man I considered a mere dabbler, and suggested that we go to his vaults, where I would sample the wine and settle the question once for all.

"Your cold," he said.

"It is nothing."

"My friend, no. I would not have you risk your health."

"I insist. Amontillado!"

He persisted in his solicitude, but I was adamant. In the end, at my insistence and over his protests, we went to his vaults.

Though I had often visited in his palazzo, I had never entered the vaults of the Montresors. They were deeper and colder than I had anticipated, though I do not think that this fact impressed me until afterward. When we passed through the archway, and started down into the catacombs, my mind was fixed on the Amontillado.

The thought of that moment on the threshold of the vaults fills me with shame. How eagerly I plunged ahead despite Montresor's repeated expressions of concern and his solicitude for my health! I was not to be swayed. Why was I so determined? Was it only to gain some petty triumph over Montresor and Luchesi? I was on cordial terms with both men, but their approbation, their praise, meant nothing to me. Perhaps I took pleasure in the prospect of deflating Luchesi's pretensions and informing Montresor that he had been deceived. I cannot truthfully say what I thought or felt then.

Not far from the foot of the long flight of steps I had a severe fit of coughing, and Montresor once again urged that we turn back. Again I refused. He offered me a draught of Medoc, which I accepted. We went on, pausing after a time to drink again. We talked of many things, but I cannot remember clearly the words that passed between us. Wine and the foul air had befuddled my senses.

We came to a shallow recess scarcely large enough to contain a man. I entered eagerly, groping before me for the cask. My hands encountered a wall slimy with nitre. Before I was aware of what was happening, Montresor had thrown a chain about my waist and secured it with a heavy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

padlock. I dropped my torch, and it lay at my feet. He stepped back, out of the recess. I lurched after him, but was arrested by the chain, which was fixed to heavy staples in the wall.

Montresor spoke, but I cannot remember his words, only that they were spoken gently, almost lovingly. He studied me for a time with apparent satisfaction. He then uncovered a cache of building stone and mortar. To my astonishment and horror, he began to wall up the entrance to the recess.

For a time, I was stupefied by the impossibility of what was happening. And then I lost all self-control. I babbled, I cried out, I shrieked like a lost soul, I pulled furiously at the chain. I wept like a child. Montresor was unmoved. He paused once in his labors, and seated himself on a heap of bones to observe my struggles, as if I afforded a pleasing spectacle. When I screamed, he matched me scream for scream, and when at last I fell silent, weeping with pain and weakness and despair, he rose without speaking and resumed his work on the wall. And after that, I remember only a terror greater than any I have ever known.

He left my torch within my grasp when he fitted the last block in place. Was it a gesture of mercy, a small act of remorse; or was it the ultimate cruelty? I cannot say.

I lost all track of time. For perhaps a few minutes, perhaps for an hour or more, I hung slumped in my chains. Shame at my own gullibility, bitter regret at the lost opportunities to turn back, guilt at my bestial drunkenness, thoughts of my wife and family, fear of the death that awaited me, left me in despair. I wept helplessly. And then my mind cleared, and I realized that I must attempt to free myself while strength remained in my limbs and I had air to breathe and the faint light of my flambeau to see by. Soon all would be dark, smothering dark.

With all my strength I pulled at the chain. The padlock and staples held fast. I tried again, and once again. The chain cut into my flesh, but did not yield. I paused to rest only when I grew faint from the noxious air.

A single broken block of stone lay just within reach of my foot. I drew it closer, took it up, and began to beat at the staple in the wall. Eventually I felt a slight movement, and returned to my struggle with new hope and strength. After more effort, the staple came free and my chain fell away. I hurled myself against the newly built wall. The stones were irregular and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

inexpertly laid. The wall yielded at the impact. It buckled, then it began to crumble and fall, and I was free.

I lay for a time amid the rubble, gasping for breath, my head pounding, and then I took up the torch, by this time barely smoldering, and looked about me. The light was so feeble it scarcely cast a shadow. I staggered forward. All directions were the same to me then. I wanted only to be away from that foul cell.

When the torch died, I stumbled on in darkness. Unseen things passed near me, brushing my face and clinging to my garments. For a time, I was near madness. I shouted, I sang, I laughed, I conversed with the dead whom I pictured following my progress with empty eyes and lipless grins, urging me, the outsider, the intruder, the condemned Fortunato, to join them as guest of the house of Montresor for an eternal visit. Loudly I declined their importunings.

Then there was light and air. I remember a ruined garden, long abandoned and thickly overgrown; a dawn, misty and chill, like no other dawn I have ever known, a dawn that was the beginning of my new life, risen from the grave where Montresor had buried me. I was outside the city walls, near the bank of the river. When I knelt at a stream to wash away the filth of the catacombs, I saw that my hair had turned white.

Air and light brought me to my senses. My mind was clear. I could have entered the city unrecognized, but I knew that I was not ready. It would take time for my body and my mind to recover fully, and I did not want to confront Montresor in a weakened state. I sat long by the water, thinking and planning, and at last decided to make my way to the hills and remain there, regaining strength, while I laid my plans slowly and judiciously. I would be avenged, but with no quick stroke. No dagger thrust for me, no poisoned cup, no assassin's hand. I would repay measure for measure, generously. But only in the fullness of time.

My new companions were simple men who asked no questions of a stranger who was willing to work for his keep. I came among them wearing motley, stained and torn in the course of my ordeal, and they accepted my story of flight from the service of a cruel master. I told them a story, sang them a song, danced and capered for them, and these woodcutters and charcoal-burners laughed and shouted their approval. They gave me food

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and took me in. And I, Fortunato, bearer of a centuries-old name, rejoiced to be accepted as their equal.

I worked side by side with the men of the hills, and felt my body hardening, my strength growing. Every stroke of my axe was a blow at Montresor. I imagined him burning and choking within the charcoal mounds, and smiled at the thought of his agony. When I dropped on my heap of straw at night, every muscle stiff and aching, I forgot my pain and exulted at the new strength and hardness of these hands that would one day crush Montresor.

Each night I asked myself, "Shall it be tomorrow?" Every morning I awoke with the thought that this day my retribution might be at hand. I savored the thought as I lay waking, and then as I rose I told myself that I would wait and enjoy the anticipation for one more day. I looked down from the hills above the city to where Montresor awoke confident and serene and gloated over his triumph. I pictured him consoling my wife and daughter, lighting a candle at the cathedral, speaking sadly of his companion Fortunato, who vanished so mysteriously on the night of carnival without a word to his family or his closest friend. I imagined him shedding tears and sighing, being comforted by all our acquaintances for the loss of his beloved Fortunato. My plans for his destruction grew ever more refined. I thought no more of squeezing the breath from Montresor slowly, ever so slowly, and then breaking his neck with a sudden snap. I thought of other ways to make him suffer, and went to sleep each night with his imagined screams and pleadings a sweet lullaby in my ears.

Three years passed, three years and a bit more, and then a beggar came among us with news of plague in the city. As he gave his account, I fell into a frenzy at the thought that death might deliver Montresor from my hands. I told myself I must return this very day, burst into his palazzo and dispatch him at once. And as I rose to depart, the beggar began to relate the tragedy of the great house of Fortunato. I stood frozen while he told how first the master of the house had disappeared, and now his wife and daughter and all their servants had been claimed in a single night by the plague. Their palazzo stood empty, a house of death shunned even by thieves.

At his final words, I lost all reason. I flew at the uncomprehending man and had to be dragged off him by force. When I came to my senses once

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again, I was lying on a pallet in the infirmary of a monastery. I was bruised and bloodied, in pain and very weak, and my mind was clouded. I could remember nothing. And for the first time in many years, I knew peace.

The monks told me that I had been found at their gate, severely beaten and bound hand and foot. They had taken me in, cleaned me and fed me, and tended my bruises and lacerations. I slept long and deeply, and woke with my senses restored but my memories broken and scattered. I did not know my name.

When I recovered from my injuries, they permitted me to stay. I was helpful and willing to work, and I soon became a familiar figure in the monastery. They gave me a new name, and set me simple tasks, which I willingly performed. And the years passed.

I found serenity in my new life. My memory did not return, but my mind cleared, and I began to read and engage in discourse with the monks. I had a recurring dream that I had dwelt for a time among the dead, and been delivered and returned to the land of the living. And if this were indeed so, then my life must have a purpose.

I conceived a desire to be admitted to the order. This was impossible, for I had come surrounded by mystery. Of my past I could remember only fragments; I knew nothing of my origins; I did not even know my real name. Yet I could read and write, and was well educated and well spoken. I showed more than common intelligence. My appearance was by this time that of an old man, but my strength was that of one much younger.

I made entreaties, and again and again I was rejected. The mystery of my past made it impossible for me to enter Holy Orders. But I was permitted to remain with the monks and assist them in their good work.

For many years I did not set foot outside the gate. I worked and prayed and ministered in any way I could to those who came to us in need. Much good might be done within the walls, and I had no desire to enter the unknown world beyond.

Then the plague returned. We worked to exhaustion and past it, and still the sick and dying came to us for succor. One by one my brothers fell, while I remained untouched. A morning came when I awoke to total silence and found that I was the only one left alive in the monastery. I buried the dead and waited for the sick to come, but no one came. At last I set forth to do what good I could in the world beyond the gate.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I traveled through the ravaged countryside preaching and consoling, comforting the sick and the dying. I saw many terrible sights, but I embraced the daily horror as my opportunity to atone for the forgotten sins of my lost years. I followed where God led, and in time I came to a certain city and walked unchallenged through the gates.

The name of the city meant nothing to me. I walked aimlessly through the deserted streets. As I proceeded, certain features — a fountain, a square, the façade of a palazzo — seemed familiar. I felt that I had been here before, or perhaps seen this city in a dream, or a vision.

I rounded a corner and found myself in a place I knew. In an instant, recognition burst upon me, as though a hundred torches had flared in a darkened room, revealing familiar faces, hangings, paintings, furniture. I had walked here once, long ago. I had called this city home.

I stood in the square before the palazzo of the Montresors. I paused, unable to move. Names and memories half a century old came back, beating at my mind like the wings of angry birds.... Fortunato, Montresor, Luchesi, Amontillado.... *Nemo me impune*.... A wall rising before my eyes. A man in motley shrieking in terror, another in black, watching.

I staggered and clutched at a gate to support myself. I moaned and sank to my knees. For a time I was overcome by the flood of memories, and knelt trembling, my eyes tight shut; I prayed for forgiveness; I resolved to turn my back on times and deeds best forgotten. The past and its horrors were dead; my duty was to the living.

In time I grew calm. I pulled myself to my feet. I was still clinging to the gate, gathering my wits, when a voice called to me from the palazzo. I turned and saw a man in the doorway, beckoning urgently.

"Come quickly! The master is dying!" he said.

He admitted me, and then he fled, leaving the doors flung wide. The house was hushed. I had not set foot in it for fifty years, but I recognized my surroundings at once.

Montresor was gaunt. His eyes, set deep in dark hollows, were closed, his breath labored. The bedclothes scarcely showed a human form beneath, so wasted was he. His arms were like sticks. His bony hands, in contrast, appeared grotesquely oversized.

"I must confess," he said, and the strength in his voice surprised me.

I could not offer him absolution, for though I wore the robes of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

order, I was not ordained. But I could provide him the consolation of confessing his sins as one might to a comrade on the eve of battle. God would hear him, and forgive. I seated myself by the bed. As Montresor spoke, my memories took on new clarity, for he confessed not as others do, in a muted catalogue of sins, but as one telling a story to an old companion. I listened and relived that night with him.

"Have you anything more you wish to tell?"

"Many things. But that is my greatest sin," he said. "I have lived with it for fifty years."

The very act of confessing seemed to have lent him strength and animation. He went on to recount the misdeeds of a long life. We prayed, and as I ended my prayer, he turned his head, opened his eyes, and looked full into my face. I heard him gasp. He stared at me with terror on his wasted features. He started to lift a skeletal hand to point, and then he shuddered in a hideous convulsion and was still. I took up his hand, and it fell limply when I released it.

I closed his eyes and covered his face, and then I fell to my knees and prayed.

Inscrutable are the workings of God. Montresor lies on his deathbed while the man he buried prays for his soul. He will take his place in the vaults, beside his forefathers, and I will say a final prayer over him. And then I will rise a second time from the catacombs beneath this palazzo and resume my work among the living.

As for Montresor...*In pace requiescat!*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

After last month's "A Game of Chicken" and October's "A Democracy of Trolls," you probably don't have any idea what to expect when you see Mr. Finlay's name affixed to a story. Neither does anyone in our offices and we think that's a good thing. His latest contribution to our pages is a heroic fantasy that introduces two characters we're apt to see more of in the future.

For Want of a Nail

By Charles Coleman Finlay

THE BULLTOAD STRAINED at its leather leash, eager to ease back into its cool niche in the city's stone wall. The guard, similarly gravid-bellied and well-warted, lashed the monster with his crop, driving it into the open to intimidate the jostling, impatient queue of mendicants, merchants, mercenaries, and miscellanies that stretched across the seven-arched Bridge of the Bey of Desmeé, only dry crossing on the turbulent River Plohtus between the hill country and the sea.

Well back in line, just above the third arch, a stocky man with an oft-broken and badly bent nose turned toward his slighter, charcoal-haired companion. "Exactly how big is that beast?"

It was an idle question — Kuikin tended to both idleness and curiosity — since he could look the toad in the eye or guess the square yardage of its olive-drab, pebble-plated skin.

Vertir bounced on the balls of his feet. "Oh, I'd say it's about a half foot or so over five, much like you. Though it lacks your girth. Are you planning to wrestle it? Or woo it?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Leave it to you to look at a toad and think of love." He paused. "No, I wondered how big a gig we'd need to spear it."

Vertir's gaze darted to the city battlements looming above them, then to the guards just inside the gate. "A bulltoad's just to scare the dimwits. No real danger. It'd be a waste of your spear, trust me."

Another group completed the registrar's vellumwork and passed under the portcullis into the city. The line ratcheted forward.

Kuikin nudged his companion, who stiffened, hand touching the long knife at his waist. "What?"

"Look at that," muttered Kuikin.

A giggling young maiden, wearing the deep-necked white toga typical of the southern Beyants, had skipped away from her family to chat with the bulltoad's guard. One sandaled foot massaged the bare calf of the leg she stood on. The guard — or toady — grabbed the bottom of his cuirass and tugged it down over his bulging gut.

"She's beautiful," said Kuikin.

Vertir rolled his eyes. "You say that about every woman. That crone over there, the hunchback, I bet she excites you too."

"I implore you to be serious. What does a pretty girl see in that vile, loathsome, and repulsive creature?"

"It's the tongue."

"No, I meant the gua — "

But the guard, perhaps knowing the same thing, barked a word of command — "Fly!" — and flicked the tasseled end of his crop. The toad's whitish-yellow tongue immediately shot out past it and smacked into a pigeon that had landed on the bridge's balustrade. The bird snapped back, disappearing in the toad's throat. A few feathers spiraled slowly toward the swift water below.

The girl shivered, and made a very pleased squeal of disgust. The toady chortled smugly. His tongue twitched in his broad, lipless mouth.

"Told you so," said Vertir, who was always saying that. Kuikin put up with it because Vertir was so often right.

Ahead of them, at the table by the gate, a shaggy-haired barbarian who stood shoulders above the crowd commoted suddenly with the registrar.

"*You want a piece of me*?" he shouted in his thick accent, thumping fist-sized fingers on his chest. He stepped back, in an effort to calm

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

himself. "But I give you my word. I have quarters here already. What more do you need?"

"It's the new rule," said the registrar. "You can enter the city and go to your quarters if you'll just calm down. And. Give. Me. A. Snip!"

"No man's going to cube my flesh for any nine-eyed wizard to dice with!" With that, the barbarian kicked the table. He lurched forward as it fell, perhaps regretting his rash action and hoping to stay the fall of the registrar, or perhaps following up his initial attack. It was hard to tell.

"Fly!" shouted the toady as the crop cracked.

The toad's tongue shot out, smacking into the barbarian's temple like a big wet fish and spinning him sideways. His body twisted one direction and the tongue retracted, tugging his bearded visage in another. His neck snapped, loud as a dry stick. Kuikin saw the man's eyes widen briefly in surprise before his body folded and fell ragdoll to the ground.

The southern girl's shrill screams clashed with the orders shouted by the guard, though both were lost in the general clamor of the crowd. Kuikin drove a wedge forward, with Vertir slipping up behind, as some of the people fled.

The toad, unable to lift its meal into its mouth, had shifted its gargantuan bulk and taken a couple steps toward the corpse at the end of its extended tongue.

The toad-tender tried to drive the beast back to its niche, but the tongue was still firmly trapped under the barbarian's head. One of the city guards rushing to the gate to help restore order fell over the tongue like a tripwire. The panicked toad emptied its bladder in a single, barrel-cracking gush.

Kuikin's eyes watered at the pungent, ammonial odor. He wiped them dry and held his breath just in time to see the toady slip and fall into the puddle. The toad frantically tore its tongue free at the same moment, leaving a chunk behind. It turned around, sweating curds of milky poison from the glands behind its huge eyes.

By the time the whole mess was over, the table uprighted, and order restored, Kuikin and Vertir had taken a place above the first arch, near the head of the line.

The guard, smeared with mud and toad-piss, tried to recover his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dignity while using a wooden paddle to scrape off the poisoned curds into a bucket.

"I've heard," Kuikin said to him, "that witches beyond the southern deserts make a life-prolonging yogurt from that."

"Yes," added Vertir, "but it makes them look like toads as well, eh? I was down by the Dry Lake west of the Salt Plains once and ran into a small one. Thought it was a bulltoad until it croaked the most ominous rhymes."

The toady ignored these overtures to conversation while one of the remaining city guards told them to mind their mouths and stay in line. They witnessed a discussion about whether the dead barbarian should be carried into the castle or thrown in the river. Those in favor of the latter wanted to strip him of valuables. Those arguing the former feared the anger of certain sorcerers. They split the difference by stripping him first, then hauling him inside. A family of slug-oil traders followed the corpse through the gate, leaving Kuikin and Vertir at the head of the line.

The registrar wiped the sweaty forelock back over his bald spot, looked at Vertir, and sighed. "Any weapons to declare?"

Vertir tapped his sword and long knife.

"The usual." The registrar noted these. "Name, city of origin."

"Spaery," he lied. "From Amrankl, eh."

The registrar eyed him suspiciously. "You don't sound like an Amranklian. You sound more like a Shinook."

The ruling Prime of Shin wielded little personal power, but he provided a core of the Dynast's most loyal troops. The Bey of Desmeé served the Dynast also, on the opposite pole of the realm.

Vertir stared down the registrar. "You asked where I was from, and that's Amrankl, where I served as a bodyguard in the House of Hmyrth. I may have been born in Shin, but I was happy to get away from there, let me tell you. The Shin army couldn't rout a herd of sheep."

Kuikin interrupted. "Did you say *rut* a herd of sheep? 'Cause I heard the Shin army — "

His tale of martial bestiality went unfinished. The registrar scrawled *Amrankl* on the small scrap and grunted, "Reason for entering the city."

"Heard war's coming. Wanted to sign up for the Bey's guard."

"You're a bit short for the guard, aren't you? Don't go thinking that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

just because the Bey's got a magic aegis that makes him invulnerable, his guardsmen are too."

A muscle jumped in Vertir's neck. "The Bey would be lucky to have me. I'm rated master in short sword, long sword, curved sword, and two swords. I've been instructor in pike and pole combat for the frontier forces of Shin. I studied the Way of the Fist and Foot with the monks of Zhitong, defeated Gomul gladiators in open hand combat in the arena at Pyune, and once served in the mercenary forces of Elee." (Which Kuikin thought was troweling it on a bit thick, even if true, since Elee, despite his lasting reputation, had been dead and his troops disbanded for nearly twenty years.) "Besides," Vertir jerked a thumb at Kuikin, "I'm not as short as he is."

"Ha!" laughed Kuikin. "Not only am I two fingers taller than you are, but I weigh two stone more and can tie your skinny limbs into bootlaces."

"Three stone at least," Vertir told the registrar. "Toss him in the river and he'll sink like a rock."

"Sure," the registrar droned. He grabbed a strawman effigy from the pile on the table and picked up his knife. "Nail."

Vertir held out his left hand. The fingers were crusted with dirt. "You want to trim and clean the rest while you're at it?"

The registrar ignored this. He put the fingernail clippings in a small bag, shoved it inside the effigy, and tied the slip of identifying vellum around the whole thing. He carefully stamped another sheet and handed it to Vertir. "Here's your pass. Keep it with you at all times, and produce it if asked by any of the City Guard. The mercenary companies and the City Guard are hiring in the Gate Square, just inside. You might try your luck there. You've got three days to get hired by someone or get out of the city, but you shouldn't have any trouble. You," he said to Kuikin. "I suppose you're here to join the Bey's Guard also. What're your weapons?"

"Only this knife," he lifted his jacket and showed the one in his belt, "plus a dull spoon in my pocket."

The registrar stopped writing. "You'll have a hard time making the guard — or any of the mercenary companies — without your own weapons."

"I don't care much for weapons. I'm a scribe."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The registrar wiped his sagging forelock back over his bald spot again, and straightened. "Where'd you train?"

"I started out as a page in the court of the Duke of Mourvil, then served as a chapter in the Temple at Kolumpa." Known, but undistinguished places, plausible untruths. Kuikin's beard itched fiercely. He resisted the impulse to tug at it.

The registrar nodded, one professional to another. "I started off serving a sentence in the Workhouse in Juko, and picked up the rest here in Desmeé. Ever show any talent for sorcery?"

"No."

The registrar nodded again, sympathetically. "Me neither. Tomorrow morning, if you go up to the chapterhouse — columns, brick and marble — just beside the Temple, they might find work for you."

"My utmost gratitude." He sketched a bow.

"Not at all." The registrar shifted the scroll that listed all the parties and their purpose for entering the city. Below the slug-oil traders, he made the mark for two and, copying the reason given for the majority of entrants, wrote *seek adventure.*

Kuikin suppressed a snort. Adventure was the last thing they sought. The registrar selected one of the smaller scraps. "Name, city of origin."

"Chookins, of Powtry, most recently of Amrankl."

The registrar jotted this down, and picked up his knife.

Kuikin pointed nervously to his beard. "Can you take hair instead?" He held out his barren fingertips. "Nail-biter."

"I'll find something," said the registrar, drawing blood as he pared off several ragged ends. Kuikin sucked briefly on the sore fingers and tried not to nibble them.

Meanwhile, the registrar completed the effigy, and, after regarding Kuikin carefully for a moment, tugged a piece of straw loose on the head to fashion a nose. He handed Kuikin his paper. "Find work, or be out in three days. Next!"

With a friendly nod to the guard, who was sulking like the toad, Vertir and Kuikin passed under the shadow of the wall and through the gate.

What had been a distant, muffled hum became a din. Hawkers, bawlers, bawds, and beggars filled the open square. Traders congregated in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the center while a few barbarians shouldered their way through the crowd. The city guards by the gate paid no heed to Kuikin and Vertir, but the recruiters for the mercenary companies beckoned them to their brightly colored booths. Hostelries, hovels, and shops hemmed in the square. Above the rooftops rose the hills of the city, the most defensible capped by the thick-walled Fortress, called Palace, of the Bey. The steepest hill was topped by the shining Temple of Gaud Chrysalis.

As the two men snaked through the throng, Kuikin pointed out the archers of the Velish Legion, famous for their black-feathered shafts.

Vertir nodded. He'd seen them too. "We should go to the Shrine of Lost Warriors," he said, leading the way down one of the side streets in the shadow of the city wall.

They found the building easily enough — an ancient arched square. In the center of the courtyard, a fire burned in a stone urn. A shriveled monk, an old soldier missing one hand, added more tinder to the flame, then disappeared politely.

The two men secreted themselves behind the pillars under one of the arches. While Kuikin peeled off his beard, still attached to the skin of the dead man from whom it had been flayed, Vertir removed another dead man's nails from his hands. Kuikin drew his knife and grabbed Vertir's braid. "Are you sure you don't want me to leave this on?" he whispered. "Mirielle might like to have a rein to steer you by."

"Just cut it close to the scalp," Vertir replied. "I don't want any stray hair to draw some wizard's spell."

Kuikin grinned. Vertir never spoke of his wife, Mirielle, or his children, when they were on a mission. Perhaps denying he had anything to lose was the only way he could risk his life. He sawed through the braid, painstakingly attached hair by hair and dyed to match — hours of labor undone in a moment. Then he turned so Vertir might do the same for him.

"I didn't believe the rumors," Kuikin said quietly, as his head tugged back.

"Neither did Fogge," answered Vertir. "And he should have expected it, since he was here just a few weeks ago." Fogge, the Dynast's chief spy in Desmeé, was the barbarian who'd had his neck snapped at the gate. "I swear I never saw a bulltoad do anything like that before."

They entered the courtyard, feeding the bits of nail and hair into the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

flame as if they were remembering a dead comrade. The hairs sizzled and writhed as the fire consumed them. The flesh attached to the beard smelled like burned meat. They bowed their heads to inhale the spirits of the dead men. Kuikin thought of Fogge. "The cost involved in registering everyone that way must be staggering."

"Yeah," murmured Vertir. "It cost Fogge his life."

The old man waited for them near the exit with his good hand outstretched. They each gave him a copper as they stepped outside.

Kuikin paused in the narrow street. "He'll be a rich man if we fail." He bit at his thumbnail. "We're one man short now."

"No, we're two men short. Fogge was the tall one."

Vertir turned everything into a joke. Kuikin forced himself to frown. "Without Fogge, there's no reason to follow our instructions."

"Why not? We can still find his men, get jobs near the Bey, all like we planned. What's the problem?"

The assassination would be suicide. "There's no time. If he's hired the Velish Legion from across the border, then he'll make his move soon."

"Now, that's true." Vertir waited until a servant with a pair of children passed by before he continued. "Which makes it more important that we stop him."

"Fogge misled the Dynast's advisors." It was an opinion, but like all his opinions, Kuikin stated it as fact. "The Archsorcerer is the real source of the rebellion. Without him, there'd be no aegis, and the Bey would dare not be so bold."

"The Bey will still have the aegis even if we eliminate his Archsorcerer." Vertir looked straight into Kuikin's eyes. "You have a plan?"

"We can steal the spell-book I described to you."

"Ah. So that's why you mentioned it." He checked the alley both ways and glanced up at the wall. "We'll make one attempt, then go back to the other plan. Agreed?"

Kuikin exhaled. "Agreed."

"Where is it?"

"House of the Lemon Tree, on the Alley of Pools," he said, setting off into the heart of the old city. "It's in the Garden District. The collector's name is Bibelot, a recluse, octogenarian, last scion in his wayward branch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the Yrges family. He inherited some unusual relics, among them the spell-book." The Yrges were one of the oldest, most eminent families of Empyr, which was how Kuikin knew of the old man.

Wide, planned streets led them to narrow dog-legged alleys where huge mansions framed tiny gardens designed with all the perfection of inlaid wood. From there, they followed the sulfurous stink to the Alley of Pools. A veiled nun in rustling scale-robes whisked flies from the backs of the sacred lizards. The six-foot-long beasts sipped at the brackish springs and blinked coldly at passersby.

"Look out," whispered Vertir. "Forked tongues — they could hit both our heads at once."

Kuikin groaned.

The street beyond the shrine was too crowded to pass. People sat at tables along an old stone wall that leaned precariously out over the alley. Servers ran in and out of an old rusted gate carrying platters of food, yelling at people to move aside, gathering up the empty trenchers. A long line stretched out of the front door. Kuikin pointed another direction. "Let's go around."

"I think this is the place." Vertir indicated a sickly tree that hung out over the leaning wall. "Aren't those lemons?"

Kuikin made a sour face. "Yes."

"You didn't mention any serving house."

"I didn't know there was one," Kuikin replied. "My sources said he was an epicure, with expensive tastes. This all looks very new. We'll see if he still lives here."

Vertir sighed as they joined the other patrons. "It's our fate today to stand in queues. If we die in Desmeé, we'll have to wait in line outside Sheol's skull and ivory gates."

"If *you* die in Desmeé. I don't intend to."

"I'm not afraid of dying."

It was a challenge. Kuikin inhaled sharply — the scents of cardamom and roast lamb wafted out the door — and didn't answer it. They were pressed between a group of merchants and a crowd of fashionably dressed youngsters as the line peristalted forward. Kuikin's heart pounded unexpectedly.

"Look at that magnificent portico," he said, as they came up to the entrance. He ran his hands over the framing columns. "That's a flawless

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

example of Ohbanege's school of architecture. Hundreds of years old. Ohbanege built houses similar to this all over Empyr, before the Dynast called him to court, but examples of his work are unknown this far south — "

Vertir nudged him in the ribs. "Look at the counter. I think the serving lass likes you."

Kuikin turned in the doorway. The fair-haired girl smiled at him and waved. "It's worse than that," he said.

"How much worse?"

"She knows me. But," he touched Vertir's wrist, and whispered, "maybe this is our good luck. Perhaps she can gain us access to Bibelot's library."

"Maybe, perhaps. Luck's a faithless lover."

The party ahead of them placed their order and then took some newly emptied seats. Kuikin and Vertir stepped up to the counter. The girl beamed at them both.

"It's so good to see a familiar face from Empyr," she said. "You frequented *The Spider and Bush*. Kuikin, right?"

He winced inwardly and tried desperately to recall her name. "Yes! What an unexpected pleasure. How did you...?"

She blushed. "A husband. He heard the city guard was hiring down here just after. I was referred as a housekeeper, one of my customers at the *Spider*."

"Ah." Probably the same customer who was also his source of information.

"Yes, but then when we arrived, it was a serving — "

Kuikin heard the bangles just before the hand shot out and smacked the girl across the cheek — it was a woman with hennaed hair, kohl around her eyes, smelling of spiced unguents. She was in her middle years, though her exact age was hard to guess. Something about her, faintly, buzzed.

"We've a whole line here," she chided the girl, "out into the street, and you hold things up by flirting with the customers!" She turned to Kuikin and Vertir, and talked over them to the people behind. "I'm sorry! She's a trollop, from the north. No good, obviously, but servants — what can I do?" She threw her hands up in despair, and looked straight at Kuikin. "What do you need?"

With this woman, Kuikin decided that one must play boldly to win. "Bibelot sent for us. He has an item he wishes to sell."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The woman's eyes hardened into twin stones. Then she smiled, without any warmth at all, flicked her fingers at the girl to wait on the next customers, and beckoned the two men to the end of the counter.

Kuikin heard the buzz more clearly. Hidden among the bangles on her wrist was a bracelet of ensorcelled bees. Prostitutes wore them sometimes as protection against their customers. One sting could paralyze or kill, depending on the insect and its venom. They were costly safeguards. He counted three deadly blue-striped beads — lazuli wasps — and two amber-metallic gems — smaller, less poisonous sap bees.

"Bibelot is indisposed," she said. "I see to his concerns now, financial and otherwise."

"Are you — " began Vertir.

"His wife." She shooed away the question by flicking her fingers again, and crossed her arms. "How can I help you?"

"It's a book," said Kuikin.

"A book?"

"Scroll sheets, bound thus." He put his palms together, opening and closing them. "A codex."

"Yes, yes. He has such — a whole room." Her mouth tightened. She studied them both, from head to foot. Kuikin could almost hear the abacus click in her head as she tallied up their worth. "His codices are very valuable," she said. "Very valuable. Who are you again?"

"I'm a scribe from," he glanced at the girl who carefully avoided looking at them, "Amrankl." Best to stick to the lie that was written. "This certain book — codex — is old, nearly worthless. I was going to purchase it, as a favor for Bibelot. It's bound in red leather, with a nine-pointed star embossed on its cover."

She laughed then, and blinked her kohled lids at him. "I'm sure I can find something between two covers for you." She smiled at Vertir. "Both of you. Let me, hmmm, see if Bibelot is able to receive visitors. Yes. I'll send a servant for you shortly."

She disappeared through the kitchen door. Kuikin fished a coin from his pouch and palmed it surreptitiously over the counter for the girl.

Vertir faced the exits. "I thought you said this Bibelot had good taste. Did that extend to women?"

"I said he had *expensive* tastes. You don't think she's expensive?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Vertir sneered at him. If he had Vertir's wife, Kuikin thought, he might feel the same way. Although he doubted it.

Patron followed patron. A soldier wearing the epaulets of the city guard and a huge smile entered the house and hopped to the front of the line. When he leaned over the counter to kiss the girl, he saw the red mark on her cheek. The smile vanished. She said something to him, nodding in Kuikin and Vertir's direction. He scowled at them like a man looking for a fight.

"If he comes after us," said Vertir, who must have been thinking the same thing, "you stay behind me."

"He's not coming after us," answered Kuikin, hopefully.

She held his arm and whispered to him frantically as some of the other customers began to complain. He jerked free. She shoved someone else's order into his hands, which raised the complaints to a new pitch. He pushed the plate back across the counter and bolted out the door.

"See," said Kuikin. "It turned out fine."

"Right." The sarcasm was sharper than any blade. "Someone who recognizes us, knows your true name, and where we've really come from just told all that to one of the city guard. Fine."

That would only matter if they stayed in the city. As Kuikin prepared to point this out, a small servant appeared at the door. She was pierced and tattooed in the manner of the seafolk, but her diminutive stature and webbed fingers indicated as much.

"My mistress summons you."

They followed the little one through the kitchen door, where Kuikin noticed one of her fellow tribesmen, the sound of a cleaver biting through bone, the heat of the open flames, and the sharp smell of bitter milk and onions. She picked up a tray containing a steaming tea kettle and one cup, and led them immediately up the main staircase. A new wall separated it from the front room — the plaster still appeared wet.

The woman waited for them in the square-shaped hall at the top of the steps. "Set that down there for Master Bibelot, and I'll take it in to him," she told the servant. "He says to tell you that he feels better today and thanks you for your concern."

The small woman set the tray down, bowed, and left.

Their hostess directed them through double doors into the main

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sitting room. "Let me take this to my husband. He regrets being unable to see you personally, but has instructed me in his wishes."

"That'll be fine," said Kuikin quickly.

Vertir looked at him and tapped his nose. The smell of incense was very thick. Sandalwood and something Kuikin didn't recognize.

The door clicked shut as she stepped into the hall again empty-handed. "Come into the gallery," she said, moving in a practiced, feline way that worried Kuikin. "I've prepared something to satisfy your, hmmm, appetites. While we talk."

Evening light poured in through a ceiling-high window with curtains drawn and shutters open. Several interesting paintings, landscapes in the Second Dynast style of Empyr, hung on the walls. A thick, plush carpet was centered on the floor, with embroidered pillows of various sizes cast at the corners. A table scant inches above the floor was set with a pitcher, goblets, and a variety of finger foods. There were censers set on either side of a door into yet another room.

Kuikin sat cross-legged among the cushions, hands folded in front of him. Vertir studied the paintings. She (and Kuikin wished he had asked for her name; he always felt at a loss dealing with women when he didn't know their names) lowered herself gracefully, and propped herself among the pillows.

Kuikin decided to play it boldly again. "Bibelot's exquisite taste in all things exceeds even the expectations created by his far-flung reputation."

"By no means. Your arrival is most fortuitous. My husband, and you must forgive his age and fragile health — "

"That must be very difficult for you."

She caught her breath. "He's very understanding."

"You were saying that our arrival is fortuitous. Is there something particular you had in mind?" He tried to place just the right emphasis on that second *you*.

She glanced up at Vertir, who stood by the window. "You are obviously very capable men. Bibelot must sell some small items in his collection, and wishes me to journey to Amrankl on his behalf to fetch the best price for them. Naturally, he doesn't wish me to travel alone."

Amrankl was the city of thieves. She could sell the old man's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

treasures there with no questions asked. "And what do we gain from this?" ventured Kuikin.

"You could have the codex." Her hand enscribed a circle in the air, the barely noticeable buzz mixing with the jangle of her bracelets, and came to rest on her bosom. "There might be additional compensations. If you were willing to leave Desmeé immediately."

Vertir tugged on the curtains. "Do you mind if I close these?"

"Please yourself," she said, smiling over her shoulder, "and please me."

"Is that one request or two?"

While she laughed, Kuikin leaned over and snatched a nut from one of the small bowls on the table. There was no way she'd let them out of her sight once they had the codex, no way they could involve her in their mission, and no way to return for her once it was complete. The taste of cinnamon and ginger hit his tongue pleasantly while he tried to solve this conundrum. Then the nut squirted between his teeth.

He grabbed for a napkin to spit into and she arched an eyebrow at him. "Have you never had fox testicles before? They have some, hmmm, interesting properties."

"Fox testicles?" The room darkened as the curtains closed.

She gave a throaty chuckle that was dangerous and very attractive. "You must suck on them, not chew, until you've swallowed all the juice. Here, give me the other one and I'll show you."

He plucked it from the bowl and offered it to her. She leaned forward to take it with her mouth, the neck of her dress spilling open to reveal her breasts. Her eyes were locked on Kuikin's, her glistening lips parted just so, when Vertir clapped a hand over her mouth and bore her to the floor from behind.

Kuikin flung the fox testicle aside to pinion her hand. "Beware her bees!"

Vertir nodded. "Get the vixen's mouth."

As his partner whipped the curtain cord around her wrists, Kuikin used the napkin to fashion a gag.

"If you want to tie me up," she panted, struggling without success against their combined weight, "you only need ask."

"Sorry." He bound her mouth shut. "All we really want is the codex."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

To Vertir, "We'll figure out what to do about her after we find the book."

His companion nodded, lashed her hands to her ankles, and rose, going over to the door between the censers. The woman thrashed frantically until Kuikin immobilized her with the pillows.

"This has to be the library," said Vertir, "but it's locked." He removed a long, thin knife from his boot and worked the keyhole. Something clicked at once. "However, it's not a very impressive lock."

The door opened onto a dark room. Flies flitted past Kuikin as he entered. The old man, Bibelot, lay on a settee beneath the slat-shuttered window. Stripes of light fell across his form, and Kuikin saw his chest move with the susurration of irregular breath. *Why'd she pretend he was in the bedroom*? he started to ask, but as he did so, he stepped closer and saw that the body was a dry husk filled with a churning mass of maggots, so many that they stirred the linen shirt.

"You can't get much sicker than dead," commented Vertir.

"No," said Kuikin, turning at once to the shelves. There must have been a habryant of books, all dusty. He started moving systemically across the volumes, right to left, top to bottom. "It'll be bound in dark red leather, almost the color of pomegranate," he said, discarding one volume after another.

"This one?" Vertir pulled something off the shelf.

"No, that's a — " he stopped explaining. The shelves were arranged geographically, by language, like a map. He ran to the western edge of the world. "Here it is!"

As he turned triumphantly with his prize, an angry hum whirred into the room.

"Her bees!" cried Kuikin, but Vertir had already stepped aside and smacked one out of the air with the flat of his palm. His boot crushed it on the floor as he spun and snapped his hand at another.

Kuikin swung wildly and ducked as something buzzed him. It turned, diving at him, and he knocked it away again with the codex. When it twirled and attacked a third time, he opened the book, almost by accident, and smashed it between the pages.

"I've got three," said Vertir.

"One!"

"Where's the other?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There," said Kuikin, spotting a blue glint dodging from the corpse. "No, wait, that's just a fly — aaahh!"

A sharp, jabbing pain beside his knee — the fifth insect. He swiped sideways with his hand, knocking it loose, but the pain persisted. The stinger had separated. The poison sac glistened as it pumped venom into his leg. He swiped again and knocked it loose.

"How bad is it?" asked Vertir.

Kuikin fell down, jerking his pants above his knee. He pulled his knife out and gouged out the hard knot already forming around the sting. "Not bad. It was an amber-bee." That was a guess on his part, a prayer, stated as fact. He hadn't really seen it. He squeezed it hard to make the blood flow faster. "The stinger didn't go deep because of my pants."

Vertir had disappeared. He came back through the door a moment later, carrying the bound woman like a piece of luggage. "You didn't have to do that!" he said, heaving her on top of the corpse, scattering the maggots. Her eyes were wide, the muscles of her neck roped as she tried to scream. He stepped back. "We said we only wanted the book and wouldn't molest you."

"I think that's why she did it," said Kuikin. "Here, bind this up for me."

"We'll put this silk to better use." Vertir cut a strip from the hem of the woman's dress, tied a knot in it, and bound the cut in Kuikin's leg. "You're not going to be able to walk on that in a little bit. You want to hide someplace for a day or so?"

"No, I bled most of the poison out. I'm good for a couple hours. We've got the bait — let's see who we can catch."

"So the Archsorcerer wants this book but what do we do with it?"

He stood up, pulling his pants leg down again. "Take it to him. That's as far as my plan went. I'm inventing the rest as we go along."

Vertir's face went expressionless, the way it always did when he was thinking of his own plans. "Let's go along a little faster then, before that leg seizes up. Should we go out through the front door or back through the kitchen? I don't like either."

"Ohbanege's domestic architecture was superficial — different details on the outside, but almost always the same design within."

"So?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We should find a narrow staircase from the main bedroom to the first floor and the back street."

They did. Vertir carried the book under his coat and Kuikin limped along quickly beside him. The narrow alleys of the Garden District opened onto the broader, tree-lined avenues of the Bey's precinct. Their destination, the Temple of Gaud Chrysalis, rose on its steep mount ahead of them.

"Do you think that amorous harridan killed him?" asked Vertir.

"Maybe, but he died with a smile on his face if she did."

Vertir's expressionless mask didn't crack. "So why?"

"She discovered he was penniless after he died." A guess, but he said it as though he knew it for fact. "She knows how to cook, run a business, so she's making money that way with the things at hand. But she's desperate to get away. If she could sell off some of his collection, I think she would leave."

"Do you think the servants will find her before she ends up like her husband?"

"As nosy as the seafolk are, I just hope they don't find her before we leave the city." He noticed a group of soldiers walking in front of them. Others came up on either side. He looked back and saw more soldiers behind them. He felt Vertir tensing. "They're going to the Temple," he explained, "for the sunset liturgy."

Vertir nodded, but didn't relax. "It's another line."

They fell in with dozens of other soldiers, many of them also foreigners without uniforms or insignia. The crowd bottlenecked at the base of the Staircase of a Thousand Steps. Kuikin doubted that there were more than two or three hundred, but they were steep, and his leg stiffened rapidly as they climbed. He was sweating and panting when they reached the flat summit.

"You'll have to get in better shape than that," heckled one of the soldiers as he passed them by.

"I'll be fine," Kuikin told Vertir. As though it were fact.

The Temple had the appearance of a crown, a square base with sharp-peaked gables capped by a circular dome. The stone took on golden hues in the sunset. There were piles of rubble where the Bey's Archsorcerer had disassembled the dome and opened it to the sky. The view was too steep

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to see the crystal focus he had built, but a beam of blue light fell out of the heavens like a thunderbolt into the open roof. It sizzled and crackled, setting Kuikin's hairs on edge.

"Let's go inside," Vertir said.

Kuikin willed himself forward, though his leg burned.

They were caught in the press by the door, shuffled to one side, jostled shoulder to shoulder in a crowd too thick to move. There was a dais directly across from the entrance, with doorways on the cross-axis. The Archsorcerer's device filled the vacant dome, a huge nine-pointed star, a corona without a core. He couldn't tell if they were spears of cut crystal or stalactites hewn from some cavern and polished smooth, but they hung suspended on some invisible spiderwork frame. The men huddled around the edges, hesitant to venture beneath it. Another beam of light fell into the center, bursting in an electric blue glow. The entire crowd gasped, even Kuikin.

Vertir tugged at Kuikin's sleeve and pointed to a small balcony. "There's the Bey's aegis."

It sat in plain view, impossible to steal or destroy unnoticed, an oval shield the size of a man, impressed with the features of a lion whose mane was the sun. In the torchlight, it shimmered gold, shot with blue as the last remnant flickers crackled out of existence in the crystal star.

A fellow standing next to them, having overheard Vertir's comment, remarked: "Awe-full, isn't it!"

"Wouldn't mind carrying it, the next time I went into battle," said Vertir.

The other man shook his head sadly. "It protects no man but the Bey himself. I've seen it demonstrated — as long as he holds it, weapons veer aside. Yet in another man's hand it's no better than any other shield, and an unwieldy one at that. Certain, it's a sign he's been favored by Gaud."

Kuikin wanted to ask more about this, but he was still out of breath and his reactions were very slow. Before he could speak, a cheer rose behind him. The crowd parted like wheat before a scythe, crushing him even more tightly against the other men.

A majordomo swung his staff from side to side. "Bow, bow, before the Bey!"

Kuikin and Vertir locked eyes. The dark-haired man shoved the codex

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into Kuikin's hands. His jaw was knotted in grim determination as he turned away and pushed through the crowd.

Men dropped to their knees as the Bey swaggered into view. His dark hair spilled over shoulders as broad as a yoke. He wore plain soldier's clothes, like the men around him. His only nod to ostentation hung on a golden chain around his neck, a crystal medallion in the center of his chest. It was etched with prismed rays that trapped the light, a true crown jewel, as stunning as anything the Dynast owned.

Someone, a barbarian, had the same idea as Vertir, but acted first. He drew a wickedly curved knife and lunged as the Bey walked past him. The Bey turned calmly, deflected the blade so quickly with his hand that it was almost impossible to see, and threw the man to the ground. A mob of men fell on the barbarian.

"Spare him!" cried the Bey, and silenced the cry of outrage with an upraised fist. "We have his flesh, or will. Leave him to the sorcerers — we will make an example of him!"

Snide laughter and cruel suggestions followed this. The Bey smiled benevolently as the man was dragged away. He walked across the open floor, pausing to gaze up at the crystal spinarets, then proceeded to the altar, ascended it, and stood beneath the aegis.

"Our enemies try to kill us, but we are impervious to their spies and assassins!"

Cheers.

"This is a sign — from now on, I am no longer your Bey, I am the O'Bey, Bey over Beys, the Sword of Gaud, and a Ruler who bows his neck to no other man."

Wild cheers and shouts of "O'Bey!" His charisma had the force of a storm. Men leapt to their feet then bowed on their knees again. Kuikin wiped the sweat of his forehead on his sleeve. He suspected now that the assassination attempt was staged to justify this moment.

The Bey, now O'Bey, pointed to the aegis. "Soon I shall lead you against our cowardly enemies!"

Cheers, yet again.

"With men like you behind me, Dynasts will tremble and even mountains will bow down before us!"

The roar shook the building. Another beam of light fell on the crystal,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which vibrated from the sound, spinning blue fragments around the temple.

Kuikin saw the Bey turn to the Archsorcerer and kneel. The saffron-robed sage offered his incantations to Gaud Chrysalis, invoking the ancient deity's wrath on those who opposed the will of the Bey. The tonsured chief acolyte chanted the mantras, keeping time with a deep-toned hand bell.

When he was done, the Archsorcerer bade the Bey rise, bend his head, and receive the blessing. This concluded, the Bey turned, pounding his fist on the bare center of his chest as he thrust his other hand at the aegis.

"Onward! To glory, to glory and victory, onward!"

The roar made the precarious crystal star shiver again. Surrounded by his men, led by the majordomo, the Bey turned and exited the side door.

Meanwhile, the Archsorcerer had disappeared from the dais. The chief acolyte begged the mob to rise and be dismissed. Kuikin couldn't stand up — his leg was too swollen, too stiff.

Vertir found him, pulled him to his feet. "There was no way to get close to him," he whispered. "Did you see the barbarian?"

"Yes. It was staged. To justify the proclamation."

Vertir shook his head. His eyes never looked at Kuikin, always at others. "No, I don't think so. He was one of Fogge's men. And his blow was aimed to kill — the Bey has impressive reflexes. You can see why men follow him." Coming from Vertir, that was high praise. "So what now?"

"The Archsorcerer must have gone with the Bey." The book nearly slipped through his sweaty palm as he tried to lift it; Vertir took it from him. "Let's proposition the acolyte, and see if he'll admit us to the inner sanctum."

They moved against the crowd, around the circumference of the open dome. "Must be a mess to mop up when it rains," muttered Vertir, looking up.

"Nothing like a battlefield," answered Kuikin as they approached the acolyte. "We beg your most humble pardon, servant of Gaud."

The man in silver-threaded robes turned, tilting his lean head to stare down his nose at them. "I'm sorry but if you wish to ask for a place to sleep, you'll need to see one of the lay brothers down at dormitory," he said, and turned immediately away.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kuikin cleared his swollen throat. "We have a copy of the Codex Celestis of Gal — "

The acolyte spun. "You lie!"

"We acquired it at substantial personal cost a very great distance from here, and undertook the journey because it is rumored that your master desires it."

The crystal shook again. Kuikin glanced up as a flash of starlight illuminated it and saw a shadow in the interior, like a flaw in a gem. This time Kuikin was sure it would collapse and fall, but somehow the webwork of threads supporting it held.

"Withdraw this way," commanded the acolyte, leading them into the recess off one side of the temple nave. "Your claim is nonsense, of course. Produce this volume at once, or I'll have guards summoned."

"We've got it spelled to our safety," said Vertir. "If anything happens to us, a single word will make it erupt in flames. You can hand the ashes to the Archsorcerer if you like."

The acolyte licked his lips. "You can undo this binding?"

"It's written on a strip of page taken from the codex," invented Kuikin. "Go ahead, show him the book."

Vertir pulled open his coat, revealing part of the volume.

Belief sprouted in the acolyte's eyes. He escorted them through a door and into the Archsorcerer's sanctuary, a room sparsely but spectacularly furnished. A single tapestry depicted the conquest of the Beyant by Desmeé I. One massive table sat in the middle of the room; its leonine legs ended in claws clutching balls of solid oak. Behind it sat a solitary chair fashioned like a backward-facing griffin, with wings for arms, and clawed feet, and a massive hooked beak carved in profile on the backrest. All rare pieces. Kuikin would have liked to study the craftsmanship closer. He was starting to become distracted; his thoughts buzzed like insects in the hot summer sun.

The acolyte walked around by the chair and leaned against the table. "Now let's see the codex," he demanded.

"We want the reward," stalled Kuikin. "In Amrankl, we heard there was a reward."

"You'll get your reward, but first I must see the codex."

"Show it to him," said Kuikin, following the acolyte around the table

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

so it wouldn't be between them, and gesturing to Vertir to do the same. He couldn't think of anything else to say or do. He needed time to think clearly.

Vertir set the book down, and stepped back, out of the acolyte's range of vision just far enough to show Kuikin the garrotte in his sleeve. It was a question: *Should I kill him*?

Kuikin didn't have an answer yet, so he pretended not to see.

"Yes, yes." The acolyte all but slavered. "This is the right age, and it's clearly from," he opened to the page containing the lazuli smear of the crushed wasp, " — what's this?"

"It's how we acquired it," improvised Kuikin. "Its former owner was willing to sell because of the damage."

"But this is fresh. The venom still — "

The door burst open, framing the Archsorcerer. "Come now, I need you! It is time to perform the — who are these men?"

The acolyte bowed. "Most benevolent master, they claim to have the Codex Celestis. They found it in Amrankl, just as we suspected. It's damaged but may contain the equations we seek."

The Archsorcerer's eyes fixed immediately on the book, widening considerably. He rushed forward, muttered "by Gaud, it beggars prayer," and spun the book around. "Yes, yes, this is clearly produced by the Monast Celestis during the Lectury of — "

He flipped through the pages rapidly. Kuikin's eyes blurred, as he tried to find Vertir. Hostage, they could take the Archsorcerer hostage. That was the plan now.

The seer closed the volume and looked up. "This is the spell-book of the Monast Celestis kitchen, recipes for stuffed eel and so forth. A rare book, yes, but it belongs to a man named Bibelot. How did you come to have it?"

Such plain words could not convey the depth of anger on that face, in that voice. As Kuikin opened his mouth to answer, the acolyte fell — dead or unconscious — beside him.

The Archsorcerer tapped the desk with his fingertips, saying "*Fendere*," then jumped for the door.

Vertir dodged around the table to intercept him, but the chair thrust out one of its legs. Vertir tripped and stumbled. The chair beat its wooden

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wings as it opened its beak and pounced. Kuikin saw his companion pull his knife from his belt before he was too occupied to see anything more.

For the table also came to life, rearing back to wield its mace-like feet. Kuikin scrambled away — one blow from that ball would shatter bone — and bumped into the wall. Reaching up, he ripped the tapestry from its rod and cast it over the table hoping to blind the creature. It charged him again, undeterred. Of course, the damned thing didn't have eyes. Surprising even himself, he hopped up onto the window ledge. The great oaken balls slammed into the wall, scattering chips of stone.

Kuikin poised to jump, shifted his weight onto the numb leg, and slipped. He fell beneath the rearing table. As it danced sideways trying to stomp him, he pressed his shoulder into the bottom of it and launched himself upright.

The table flipped over on its side, teetered, and slammed to the floor on its back. Its legs twitched uselessly in the air, like some massive, overturned tortoise.

Panting, his one leg collapsing, he propped himself upright against the wall.

Vertir stood over the body of the Archsorcerer. The chair lay in pieces on the floor. As Kuikin looked at the beaked face, it twitched and blinked one wooden eye at him. One of the wings clattered on the floor as it tried to flap away.

He stumbled over to Vertir's side. A knife sprouted from the back of their potential hostage. He was dead.

"What's your plan now?" Vertir asked. "How do we get the aegis out of the city?"

"Give me a moment to think," said Kuikin.

"We don't need to capture the aegis, you know, only destroy it. Without it, without the Archsorcerer, the Bey's ambitions are dead." Vertir stepped over to one of the wall sconces. "If we set the Temple aflame, will the fire be hot enough to melt it?"

"No," said Kuikin. The buzzing in his head stopped as all the pieces fell in place. He sat down abruptly. "Because the aegis isn't made of metal."

"But we saw it — "

"No, we saw the diversion. The true aegis itself is the crystal necklace

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

worn by the Bey. It draws its power from the great focus in the dome." He was light-headed. He collapsed.

Vertir leaned over him. "You're burning up with fever. Sheol's skulls, tell me true — are you hallucinating this?"

"I'm sure. I saw the Archsorcerer himself place it there after removing it from the Bey." The Bey's chest was bare when he left the dais. The shadow inside the crystal had been a man. "It was the necklace that deflected the barbarian's knife."

Vertir paused. "I saw that. It could be."

He tried to push himself upright. "We have to retrieve it. Before we're discovered."

Vertir forced him gently to the floor. "I'll go. You stay here. You're in no condition to do anything."

"Yer wrong," slurred Kuikin. He felt in perfect condition to die. But he was all alone, and too thirsty to talk. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and listened to his own stertorous breath as the wooden wing tapped uselessly on the floor. This was much worse than the last time he was stung by an ensorcelled sap bee. Although that had been bad. He shivered just thinking about it. Or maybe it was the venom. Something tugged at his trouser leg.

He rolled over and saw the back of the chair trying to get its beak into him. The wooden eye blinked at him, and Kuikin swung his fist at it, then rolled away, kicking. He wasn't sure if he was laughing or screaming. Vertir came into the room and booted the beak into the corner.

"Shhh, shhh," he said, grabbing Kuikin's forearm and tugging him upright. "We've got to get going. There were men in the nave, seeking the Archsorcerer."

"Did you — "

"Yes. As simple as plucking an egg from a nest, if the nest were spun of glass. There was even an easy way up to the lattice inside the crystal." He wrapped his arm around Kuikin, led him out the door. "Unfortunately, I didn't find it until I was on my way down."

They passed through another door, and out into the night. The cooling air soothed Kuikin.

"You have it?"

"Shhhh. Yes. I tried to smash it, with no luck."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Thass good," said Kuikin. It would be a great prize to give the Dynast. The stairs were difficult to navigate. He didn't walk down them so much as let Vertir control his fall.

A group of soldiers climbed the steps in the other direction. Kuikin put his hand on his knife, ready to fight.

"Did you hear the good news?" shouted Vertir. "The Bey is O'Bey — it's war!"

The men cheered. They had heard the news, were sorry they missed the announcement, hoped to catch a glimpse of the Bey. "What's wrong with your friend?" one asked.

"He drank too much in celebration," said Vertir, laughing, and he stumbled sideways himself, away from the guard. Then he sang:

"She was the flower, and he was the thorn,
Whenever he'd coins to bring.
But her honey drew too many bees to the horn,
And oh! How she gave him a sting, a sting,
And oh how she gave him a sting!"

The soldiers laughed. "See him safely to his bedroll, my brother," said one. Vertir continued singing, adding verses as they reached the bottom of the stairs and staggered from tree to tree, block to block, from the Temple Mount to the West Gate.

"Yer problem," complained Kuikin, "izzat you sing tavern songs like marching cadences. No mem-melody."

"Just put your right foot — your *right* foot — forward. And again." He lowered his voice. "We're coming to the West Gate. It's locked for the night, and the City Guard is there. But I've got a plan."

"Right," said Kuikin, swinging his numb leg forward. "A plan." And he started singing at the top of his voice. "SHE — "

"That's not the plan," said Vertir. "Just look sick."

Which was easy enough. A gang of the mercenary guardsmen approached them. "It's after curfew," one said. "No cause for trouble, but you need to go back to your quarters or return to the tavern district."

"They kicked us out of our quarters," said Vertir. "My friend has a fever."

"Wine fever," murmured one of the guards.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He's burning up," said Vertir. "I don't think it's the spotted plague, but there is an outbreak of that in Amrankl where we came from — that's why we left."

Everybody stepped back. "We ought to hold them for the captain," said the suspicious one. At exactly that moment Kuikin obliged Vertir's directions by spewing a gut full of venomous-smelling bile all over the street.

"Or it could be something he ate," said Vertir, trying to sound reasonable. "We had food at a restaurant this afternoon, it might have been bad. I just want to get him out of the city until we know for sure."

"Good thinking," muttered someone else, but the first one argued with him until one of the guards stepped forward.

"I'll vouch for them. I know where they ate today, at *The Lemon Tree*. I saw them. There's nothing wrong with the food."

Kuikin, his senses sharpened by the bitter acid aftertaste in his mouth, recognized the girl's husband from the shop. He still couldn't remember her name. He hated that. So many girls, so many names.

"Show them out through the side gate then," said the leader. "And if he pukes in the guardhouse, you'll scrub it clean. With your tongue."

The girl's husband took them through the little room and unbolted the door to the outside. "Good luck, and don't hurry back," he said, keeping well away. "Joi says that you're an honorable man, but if I — "

"Joi!" said Kuikin. "Thasser name. She's a — "

Vertir shoved him through the door. "Thanks. Maybe we'll see you in the morning if his fever breaks!"

The door slammed shut behind them and bolts slid into place.

A pair of torches lit the western end of the bridge, so that no one could cross it unseen. The flames attracted insects. Bats screeched, zigzagging through the air as they fed. Something glistening white whipped past Kuikin's cheek, and he lurched aside. Only Vertir's grip kept him from falling.

"Sorry," chuckled the toady. He slapped a glove on the side of his beast and rattled his sword. "He was up to bat. Didn't mean to startle you boys."

Kuikin felt Vertir tense to fight. "You know," Vertir said, "the guards inside the gate told us that this bulltoad was your mother. But I called them liars."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The toady's face grew puzzled. "What?"

"Yeah, I said there's no way you'd commit incest like that."

Vertir stood there palms open, curling his fingers, daring the toady to attack him. He wanted an excuse to avenge Fogge's death, Kuikin realized.

The toady blustered, but thought better of it. "Go on! What're you waiting for?"

Vertir calmly backed across the bridge, leading Kuikin. The toady made no move to stop them and then they were on the road beyond the Beyant. The land was stripped bare to reveal anyone approaching the bridge. They trudged down the barren road in silence, Vertir dragging Kuikin along, Kuikin stubbornly willing himself forward. The milky stream illuminated the sky, and the stars turned in their wheel until the Eye of the Hunter was fixed on them. They both knew that if pursuit sallied forth from the city now, they'd be overtaken easily.

Almost a league from the river, they left the road and set off across the hills, aiming for a sarsen-capped mound outlined against the horizon. The going was much more difficult off the road. "I've got to get this shoe off," said Kuikin, "even if I must walk barefoot. It's too swollen."

He sat down and fumbled with the laces, but his nails were sliced too short. The fever heightened the tenderness of his fingertips and made him too shaky to do it.

Vertir drew his knife and scissioned open the shoe. He handed it to Kuikin, then sliced open the pants leg also.

"Ugh!" His leg was puffy. There was an angry red knob under the blood-soaked bandage.

"It looks like it's at the worst now," said Vertir. "If we can get you into camp — "

A demonic screech jetted across the sky, a dark barb outlined against the milky starlight.

Kuikin rolled over as the arrow plunged through the shoe, ripping it from his hand and pinning it to the ground. The arrow twanged as it hit. The imp spun away from it, a cackling green plasm that bounced on Kuikin, pinged off Vertir's chest, and shot howling toward the sky in a little verdant cyclone.

"They've traced the murders to us," said Vertir.

That's one reason he was always right, thought Kuikin: he stated the obvious. "They don't have any snips for you. Your effigy is useless to them

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

— their arrows are flying toward another's man grave." With imp-guided missiles, at least his own death would be quick. Painful, but quick. "Go! You've got to deliver the aegis."

Vertir reached inside his shirt. "Your brain's been overcooked." And lifting the crystal necklace over his head, he draped it over Kuikin.

The aegis sat on his chest like a perfectly ordinary jewel, if any jewel that splendid could be ordinary. Unmagical was the better word.

A cacophony of wicked shrieks skittered across the sky. As Vertir ran safely away, a volley from the entire Velish legion fell toward him. Their shafts ticked against each other as the imps jockeyed for the first strike.

Kuikin closed his eyes, covered his head. The percussive sound of steel points piercing the soil all around him was accompanied by an inhuman dirge. He opened his eyes as the imps coagulated into a single, swirling tempest of frustration and failed purpose. Their weightless fists buffeted Kuikin, his hair whipped hard against his face, and then they whirled into the sky and were gone. A perfect circle of arrows surrounded him.

"They didn't kill me," he said. "But they've fenced me in until the Bey's footsoldiers can arrive."

Vertir laughed aloud as he stomped down the arrows. "If that's the worst the Velish archers can do, then we overestimated the danger from the Bey."

"They don't need the imps to fire into massed troops," said Kuikin. "They'd still slaughter any infantry sent against them. But without the aegis...." He tried to stand, lost his balance, and collapsed.

Vertir reached out a hand to pull him up. "Come on," he said. "If I leave you behind, Mirielle will never forgive me."

Kuikin looked up and noticed that the ready-for-death look was finally gone from Vertir's face. "We couldn't have that." He gripped Vertir's forearm, and held on tight while Vertir tugged him upright. "I didn't think the aegis would protect me."

"Neither did I," admitted Vertir.

Kuikin leaned on his friend and they continued on to the hill. As they went, his sickness dwindled. Perhaps it was a side effect of the aegis. He didn't want to guess.

"If you had to do it all over again," said Vertir after a while, "would you follow our original instructions?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No," he answered. "I'd still do it by the book."

Vertir snorted. On the hilltop ahead, among the sarsen stones, they heard their mounts and saw the shapes of men who were waiting to escort them home.

ee "doc" cummings

by elizabeth bear

ravening cruiserbeams
hurled across an unresisting sky:
grapple slickly withal
(brave men dine on
pan fried steak)
indomitable. hurling
atomic violence in concentrated quintessence
: blindingly brilliant annihilation

(a
sh
ie
ld

f
a
l
l
s
)

nobody, not even boskone, has such big guns

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Last year Dale Bailey moved from Tennessee to Hickory, North Carolina, where he now teaches American Lit and Creative Writing at Lenoir-Rhyne College. He is the author of American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction. *He is also the author of one novel,* The Fallen, *copies of which have just hit the shelves as this issue goes to press, so there might still be some books available by the time you read this. (Ah, publishing.)*

Mr. Bailey's latest story might lead some readers to the conclusion that he has scared the bejeezus out of quite a few people around various campfires. Mr. Bailey himself will not confirm this supposition but the spooked speak for themselves.

Hunger: A Confession

By Dale Bailey

ME, I WAS NEVER AFRAID OF the dark.

It was Jeremy who bothered me — Jeremy with his black rubber spiders in my lunchbox, Jeremy with his guttural demon whisper (*I'm coming to get you, Simon*) just as I was drifting off to sleep, Jeremy with his stupid Vincent Price laugh (*Mwha-ha-ha-ha-ha*), like some cheesy mad scientist, when he figured the joke had gone far enough. By the time I was walking, I was already shell-shocked, flinching every time I came around a corner.

I remember this time, I was five years old and I had fallen asleep on the sofa. I woke up to see Jeremy looming over me in this crazy Halloween mask he'd bought: horns and pebbled skin and a big leering grin, the works. Only I didn't realize it was Jeremy, not until he cut loose with that crazy laugh of his, and by then it was too late.

Things got worse when we left Starkville. The new house was smaller and we had to share a bedroom. That was fine with me. I was seven by then, and I had the kind of crazy love for my big brother that only little kids can feel. The thing was, when he wasn't tormenting me, Jeremy was a great

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brother — like this one time he got a Chuck Foreman card in a package of Topps and he just handed it over to me because he knew the Vikings were my favorite team that year.

The room thing was hard on Jeremy, though. He'd reached that stage of adolescence when your voice has these alarming cracks and you spend a lot of time locked in the bathroom tracking hair growth and...well, you know, you were a kid once, right? So the nights got worse. I couldn't even turn to Mom for help. She was sick at that time, and she had this frayed, wounded look. Plus, she and Dad were always talking in these strained whispers. You didn't want to bother either one of them if you could help it.

Which left me and Jeremy alone in our bedroom. It wasn't much to look at, just this high narrow room with twin beds and an old milk crate with a lamp on it. Out the window you could see one half-dead crab-apple tree — a crap-apple, Jeremy called it — and a hundred feet of crumbling pavement and a rusting 1974 El Camino which our neighbor had up on blocks back where the woods began. There weren't any street lights that close to the edge of town, so it was always dark in there at night.

That's when Jeremy would start up with some crap he'd seen in a movie or something. "I heard they found a whole shitload of bones when they dug the foundation of this house," he'd say, and he'd launch into some nutty tale about how it turned out to be an Indian burial ground, just crazy stuff like that. After a while, it would get so I could hardly breathe. Then Jeremy would unleash that crazy laugh of his. "C'mon, Si," he'd say, "you know I'm only kidding."

He was always sorry — genuinely sorry, you could tell by the look on his face — but it never made any difference the next night. It was like he forgot all about it. Besides, he always drifted off to sleep, leaving me alone in the dark to ponder open portals to Hell or parallel worlds or whatever crazy stuff he'd dreamed up that night.

The days weren't much better. The house was on this old winding road with woods on one side and there weren't but a few neighbors, and none of them had any kids. It was like somebody had set off a bomb that just flattened everybody under twenty — like one of those neutron bombs, only age-specific.

So that was my life — interminable days of boredom, torturous

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

insomniac nights. It was the worst summer of my life, with nothing to look forward to but a brand-new school come the fall. That's why I found myself poking around in the basement about a week after we moved in. Nobody had bothered to unpack — nobody had bothered to do much of anything all summer — and I was hoping to find my old teddy bear in one of the boxes.

Mr. Fuzzy had seen better days — after six years of hard use, he *literally* had no hair, not a single solitary tuft — and I'd only recently broken the habit of dragging him around with me everywhere I went. I knew there'd be a price to pay for backsliding — Jeremy had been riding me about Mr. Fuzzy for a year — but desperate times call for desperate measures.

I'd just finished rescuing him from a box of loose Legos and Jeremy's old *Star Wars* action figures when I noticed a bundle of rags stuffed under the furnace. I wasn't inclined to spend any more time than necessary in the basement — it smelled funny and the light slanting through the high dirty windows had a hazy greenish quality, like a pond you wouldn't want to swim in — but I found myself dragging Mr. Fuzzy over toward the furnace all the same.

Somebody had jammed the bundle in there good, and when it came loose, clicking metallically, it toppled me back on my butt. I stood, brushing my seat off with one hand, Mr. Fuzzy momentarily forgotten. I squatted to examine the bundle, a mass of grease-stained rags tied off with brown twine. The whole thing was only a couple feet long.

I loosened the knot and pulled one end of the twine. The bundle unwrapped itself, spilling a handful of rusty foot-long skewers across the floor. There were half a dozen of them, all of them with these big metal caps. I shook the rag. A scalpel tumbled out, and then a bunch of other crap, every bit of it as rusty as the skewers. A big old hammer with a wooden head and a wicked-looking carving knife and one of those tapered metal rods butchers use to sharpen knives. Last of all a set of ivory-handled flatware.

I reached down and picked up the fork.

That's when I heard the stairs creak behind me.

"Mom's gonna kill you," Jeremy said.

I jumped a little and stole a glance over my shoulder. He was standing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at the foot of the stairs, a rickety tier of backless risers. That's when I remembered Mom's warning that I wasn't to fool around down here. The floor was just dirt, packed hard as concrete, and Mom always worried about getting our clothes dirty.

"Not if you don't tell her," I said.

"Besides, you're messing around with the furnace," Jeremy said.

"No, I'm not."

"Sure you are." He crossed the room and hunkered down at my side. I glanced over at him. Let me be honest here: I was nobody's ideal boy next door. I was a scrawny, unlovely kid, forever peering out at the world through a pair of lenses so thick that Jeremy had once spent a sunny afternoon trying to ignite ants with them. The changeling, my mother sometimes called me, since I seemed to have surfaced out of somebody else's gene pool.

Jeremy, though, was blond and handsome and already broad-shouldered. He was the kind of kid everybody wants to sit with in the lunchroom, quick and friendly and capable of glamorous strokes of kindness. He made such a gesture now, clapping me on the shoulder. "Jeez, Si, that's some weird-looking shit. Wonder how long it's been here?"

"I dunno," I said, but I remembered the landlord telling Dad the house was nearly a hundred and fifty years old. *And hasn't had a lick of work since*, I'd heard Dad mutter under his breath.

Jeremy reached for one of the skewers and I felt a little bubble of emotion press against the bottom of my throat. He turned the thing over in his hands and let it drop to the floor. "Beats the hell out of me," he said.

"You're not gonna tell Mom, are you?"

"Nah." He seemed to think a moment. "Course I might use that scalpel to dissect Mr. Fuzzy." He gazed at me balefully, and then he slapped my shoulder again. "Better treat me right, kid."

A moment later I heard the basement door slam behind me.

I'd been clutching the fork so tightly that it had turned hot in my hand. My knuckles grinned up at me, four bloodless white crescents. I felt so strange that I just let it tumble to the floor. Then I re-wrapped the bundle, and shoved it back under the furnace.

By the time I'd gotten upstairs, I'd put the whole thing out of my mind.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Except I hadn't, not really. I wasn't thinking about it, not consciously, but it was there all the same, the way all the furniture in a room is still there when you turn out the lights, and you can sense it there in the dark. Or the way pain is always there. Even when they give you something to smooth it out a little, it's always there, a deep-down ache like jagged rocks under a swift-moving current. It never goes away, pain. It's like a stone in your pocket.

The bundle weighed on me in the same way, through the long night after Jeremy finally fell asleep, and the next day, and the night after that as well. So I guess I wasn't surprised, not really, when I found myself creeping down the basement stairs the next afternoon. Nobody saw me steal up to my room with the bundle. Nobody saw me tuck it under my bed. Mom had cried herself to sleep in front of the TV (she pretended she wasn't crying, but I knew better) and Dad was already at work. Who knew where Jeremy was?

Then school started and Mom didn't cry as often, or she did it when we weren't around. But neither one of them talked very much, except at dinner Dad always asked Jeremy how freshman football was going. And most nights, just as a joke, Jeremy would start up with one of those crazy stories of his, the minute we turned out the light. He'd pretend there was a vampire in the room or something and he'd thrash around so that I could hear him over the narrow space between our beds. "Ahhh," he'd say, "Arrggh," and, in a strangled gasp, "When it finishes with me, Si, it's coming for you." I'd hug Mr. Fuzzy tight and tell him not to be afraid, and then Jeremy would unleash that nutty mad scientist laugh.

"C'mon, Si, you know I'm only kidding."

One night, he said, "Do you believe in ghosts, Si? Because as old as this house is, I bet a whole shitload of people have died in it."

I didn't answer, but I thought about it a lot over the next few days. We'd been in school a couple of weeks at this point. Jeremy had already made a lot of friends. He talked to them on the phone at night. I had a lot of time to think.

I even asked Dad about it. "Try not to be dense, Si," he told me. "There's no such thing as ghosts, everybody knows that. Now chill out, will you, I'm trying to explain something to your brother."

So the answer was, no, I didn't believe in ghosts. But I also thought it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

might be more complicated than that, that maybe they were like characters in a good book. You aren't going to run into them at the Wal-Mart, but they seem real all the same. I figured ghosts might be something like that. The way I figured it, they had to be really desperate for something they hadn't gotten enough of while they were alive, like they were jealous or hungry or something. Otherwise why would they stick around some crummy old cemetery when they could go on to Heaven or whatever? So that's what I ended up telling Jeremy a few nights later, after I'd finished sorting it all out inside my head.

"*Hungry*?" he said. "Christ, Si, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." He started thrashing around in his bed and making these dumb-ghost noises. "Oooooooh," he said, and, "Oooooooooh, I'm a ghost, give me a steak. Oooooooooh, I want a bowl of Cheerios."

I tried to explain that that wasn't what I meant, but I couldn't find the words. I was just a kid, after all.

"Christ, Si," Jeremy said, "don't tell anybody anything that stupid. It's like that stupid bear you drag around everywhere, it makes me ashamed to be your brother."

I knew he didn't mean anything by that — Jeremy was always joking around — but it hurt Mr. Fuzzy's feelings all the same. "Don't cry, Mr. Fuzzy," I whispered. "He didn't mean anything by it."

A few days later, Jeremy came home looking troubled. I didn't think anything about it at first because it hadn't been a very good day from the start. When Jeremy and I went down to breakfast, we overheard Dad saying he was taking Mom's car in that afternoon, the way they had planned. Mom said something so low that neither one of us could make it out, and then Dad said, "For Christ's sake, Mariam, there's plenty of one-car families in the world." He slammed his way out of the house, and a few seconds later we heard Mom shut the bedroom door with a click. Neither one of us said anything after that except when Jeremy snapped at me because I was so slow getting my lunch. So I knew he was upset and it didn't surprise me when he came home from football practice that day looking a bit down in the mouth.

It turned out to be something totally different, though, because as soon as we turned out the light that night, and he knew we were really alone, Jeremy said, "What happened to that bundle of tools, Si?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What bundle of tools?" I asked.

"That weird-looking shit you found in the basement last summer," he said.

That's when I remembered that I'd put the bundle under my bed. What a crazy thing to do, I thought, and I was about to say *I'd* taken them — but Mr. Fuzzy kind of punched me. He was so sensitive, I don't think he'd really forgiven Jeremy yet.

I thought it over, and then I said, "Beats me."

"Well, I went down the basement this afternoon," Jeremy said, "and they were gone."

"So?"

"It makes me uncomfortable, that's all."

"Why?"

Jeremy didn't say anything for a long time. A car went by outside, and the headlights lit everything up for a minute. The shadow of the crap-apple danced on the ceiling like a man made out of bones, and then the night swallowed him up. That one little moment of light made it seem darker than ever.

"I met this kid at school today," Jeremy said, "and when I told him where I lived he said, 'No way, Mad Dog Mueller's house?' 'Mad Dog who?' I said. 'Mueller,' he said. 'Everyone knows who Mad Dog Mueller is.'"

"I don't," I said.

"Well, neither did I," Jeremy said, "but this kid, he told me the whole story. 'You ever notice there aren't any kids that live out that end of town?' he asked, and the more I thought about it, Si, the more right he seemed. There *aren't* any kids."

The thing was, he was right. That's when I figured it out, the thing about the kids. It was like one of those puzzles with a picture hidden inside all these little blots of color and you stare at it and you stare at it and you don't see a thing, and then you happen to catch it from just the right angle and — *Bang!* — there the hidden picture is. And once you've seen it, you can never unsee it. I thought about the neighbors, this scrawny guy who was always tinkering with the dead El Camino and his fat wife — neither one of them really old, but neither one of them a day under thirty, either. I remembered how they stood out front watching us move in, and Mom

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

asking them if they had any kids, her voice kind of hopeful. But they'd just laughed, like who would bring kids to a place like this?

They hadn't offered to pitch in, either — and people *always* offer to lend a hand when you're moving stuff inside. I *know*, because we've moved lots of times. I could see Dad getting hotter and hotter with every trip, until finally he turned and said in a voice just dripping with sarcasm, "See anything that strikes your fancy, folks?" You could tell by the look on Mom's face that she didn't like that one bit. When we got inside she hissed at him like some kind of animal she was so mad. "Why can't you ever keep your mouth shut, Frank?" she said. "If you kept your mouth shut we wouldn't *be* in this situation."

All of which was beside the point, of course. The point was, Jeremy was right. There wasn't a single kid in any of the nearby houses.

"See," Jeremy said, "I told you. And the reason is, this guy Mad Dog Mueller."

"But it was some old lady that used to live here," I said. "We saw her the first day. They were moving her to a nursing home."

"I'm not talking about her, stupid. I'm talking like a hundred years ago, when this was all farm land, and the nearest neighbors were half a mile away."

"Oh."

I didn't like the direction this was going, I have to say. Plus, it seemed even darker. Most places, you turn out the light and your eyes adjust and everything turns this smoky blue color, so it hardly seems dark at all. But here the night seemed denser somehow, weightier. Your eyes just never got used to it, not unless there was a moon, which this particular night there wasn't.

"Anyway," Jeremy said, "I guess he lived here with his mother for a while and then she died and he lived here alone after that. He was a pretty old guy, I guess, like forty. He was a blacksmith."

"What's a blacksmith?"

"God, you can be dense, Si. Blacksmiths make horseshoes and shit."

"Then why do they call them *black*smiths?"

"I don't know. I guess they were black or something, like back in slavery days."

"Was *this* guy black?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No! The point is, he makes things out of metal. That's the point, okay? And so I told this kid about those tools I found."

"*I'm* the one who found them," I said.

"Whatever, Si. The point is, when I mentioned the tools, the kid who was telling me this stuff, his eyes bugged out. 'No way,' he says to me, and I'm like, 'No, really, cross my heart. What gives?'"

Jeremy paused to take a deep breath, and in the silence I heard a faint click, like two pieces of metal rubbing up against each other. That's when I understood what Jeremy was doing. He was "acting out," which is a term I learned when I forgot Mr. Fuzzy at Dr. Bainbridge's one day, back at the clinic in Starkville, after I got suspended from school. When I slipped inside to get him, Dr. Bainbridge was saying, "You have to understand, Mariam, with all these pressures at home, it's only natural that he's acting out."

I asked Dr. Bainbridge about it the next week, and he told me that sometimes people say and do things they don't mean just because they're upset about something else. And now I figured Jeremy was doing it because he was so upset about Mom and stuff. He was trying to scare me, that's all. He'd even found the little bundle of tools under my bed and he was over there clicking them together. I'd have been mad if I hadn't understood. If I hadn't understood, I might have even been afraid — Mr. Fuzzy was. I could feel him shivering against my chest.

"Did you hear that?" Jeremy said.

"I didn't hear anything," I said, because I wasn't going to play along with his game.

Jeremy didn't answer right away. So we lay there, both of us listening, and this time I really *didn't* hear anything. But it seemed even darker somehow, darker than I'd ever seen our little bedroom. I wiggled my fingers in front of my face and I couldn't see a thing.

"I thought I heard something." This time you could hear the faintest tremor in his voice. It was a really fine job he was doing. I couldn't help admiring it. "And that would be bad," Jeremy added, "because this Mueller, he was crazy as a shithouse rat."

I hugged Mr. Fuzzy close. "Crazy?" I said.

"Crazy," Jeremy said solemnly. "This kid, he told me that all the farms around there, the farmers had about a zillion kids. Everybody had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a ton of kids in those days. And one of them turned up missing. No one thought anything about it at first — kids were always running off — but about a week later *another* kid disappears. This time everybody got worried. It was this little girl and nobody could figure out why *she* would run off. She was only like seven years old."

"She was my age?"

"That's right, Si. She was just your age."

Then I heard it again: this odd little clicking like Grandma's knitting needles used to make. Jeremy must have really given that bundle a shake.

"*Shit*," Jeremy said, and now he sounded really scared. Somebody ought to have given him an Oscar or something.

He switched on the light. It was a touch of genius, that — his way of saying, *Hey, I'm not doing anything!*, which of course meant he was. I stared, but the bundle was nowhere in sight. I figured he must have tucked it under the covers, but it was hard to tell without my glasses on. Everything looked all blurry, even Jeremy's face, blinking at me over the gap between the beds. I scooched down under the covers, holding Mr. Fuzzy tight.

"It was coming from over there," he said. "Over there by your bed."

"I didn't hear anything," I said.

"No, I'm serious, Si. I heard it, didn't you?"

"You better turn out the light," I said, just to prove I wasn't afraid. "Mom'll be mad."

"Right," Jeremy said, and the way he said it, you could tell he knew it was an empty threat. Mom had told me she was sick when I'd knocked on her bedroom door after school. I opened the door, but it was dark inside and she told me to go away. The room smelled funny, too, like the stinging stuff she put on my knee the time Jeremy accidentally knocked me down in the driveway. I just need to sleep, she said. I've taken some medicine to help me sleep.

And then Jeremy came home and made us some TV dinners. "She must have passed out in there," he said, and that scared me. But when I said maybe we should call the doctor, he just laughed. "Try not to be so dense all the time, okay, Si?"

We just waited around for Dad after that. But Jeremy said he wouldn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be surprised if Dad *never* came home again, the way Mom had been so bitchy lately. Maybe he was right, too, because by the time we went up to bed, Dad still hadn't shown up.

So Jeremy was right. Nobody was going to mind the light.

We both had a look around. The room looked pretty much the way it always did. Jeremy's trophies gleamed on the little shelf Dad had built for them. A bug smacked the window screen a few times, like it really wanted to get inside.

"You sure you didn't hear anything?"

"Yeah."

Jeremy looked at me for a minute. "All right, then," he said, and turned out the light. Another car passed and the crap-apple man did his little jig on the ceiling. The house was so quiet I could hear Jeremy breathing these long even breaths. I sang a song to Mr. Fuzzy while I waited for him to start up again. It was this song Mom used to sing when I was a baby, the one about all the pretty little horses.

And then Jeremy started talking again.

"Nobody got suspicious," he said, "until the third kid disappeared — a little boy, he was about your age too, Si. And then someone happened to remember that all these kids had to walk by this Mueller guy's house on their way to school. So a few of the parents got together that night and went down there to see if he had seen anything."

It had gotten colder. I wished Jeremy would shut the window and I was going to say something, but he just plowed on with his stupid story. "Soon as he answered the door," Jeremy said, "they could tell something was wrong. It was all dark inside — there wasn't a fire or anything — and it smelled bad, like pigs or something. They could hardly see him, too, just his eyes, all hollow and shiny in the shadows. They asked if he'd seen the kids and that's when things got really weird. He said he hadn't seen anything, but he was acting all nervous, and he tried to close the door. One of the men held up his lantern then, and they could see his face. He hadn't shaved and he looked real thin and there was this stuff smeared over his face. It looked black in the light, like paint, only it wasn't paint. You know what it was, Si?"

I'd heard enough of Jeremy's stories to be able to make a pretty good guess, but I couldn't seem to make my mouth say the word. Mr. Fuzzy was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shaking he was so scared. He was shaking real hard, and he was mad, too. He was mad at Jeremy for trying to scare me like that.

"It was blood, Si," Jeremy said.

That's when I heard it again, a whisper of metal against metal like the sound the butcher makes at the grocery store when he's putting the edge on a knife.

Jeremy gasped. "Did you hear that?"

And just like that the sound died away.

"No," I said.

We were silent, listening.

"What happened?" I whispered, because I wanted him to finish it. If he finished he could do his dumb little mad scientist laugh and admit he made it all up.

"He ran," Jeremy said. "He ran through the house and it was all dark and he went down the basement, down where you found those rusty old tools. Only it wasn't rust, Si. It was blood. Because you know what else they found down there?"

I heard the whisper of metal again — *shir shir shir*, that sound the butcher makes when he's putting the edge on a knife and his hands are moving so fast the blade is just a blur of light. But Jeremy had already started talking again.

"They found the missing kids," he said, but it sounded so far away. All I could hear was that sound in my head, *shir shir shir*. "They were dead," Jeremy was saying, "and pretty soon he was dead, too. They killed the guy right on the spot, he didn't even get a trial. They put him down the same way he'd killed those kids."

I swallowed. "How was that?"

"He used those long nails on them, those skewer things. He knocked them on the head or something and then, while they were out, he just hammered those things right through them — *wham wham wham* — so they were pinned to the floor, they couldn't get up. And then you know what he did?"

Only he didn't wait for me to answer, he couldn't wait, he just rolled on. He said, "Mueller used the scalpel on them, then. He just ripped them open and then — " Jeremy's voice broke. It was a masterful touch. "And then he started eating, Si. He started eating before they were even dead — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jeremy broke off suddenly, and now the sound was so loud it seemed to shake the walls — *SHIR SHIR SHIR* — and the room was so cold I could see my breath fogging up the dark.

"Christ, what's that sound?" Jeremy whimpered, and then he started making moaning sounds way down in his throat, the way he always did, like he wanted to scream but he was too afraid.

Mr. Fuzzy was shaking, just shaking so hard, and I have to admit it, right then I hated Jeremy with a hatred so pure I could taste it, like an old penny under my tongue. The darkness seemed heavy suddenly, an iron weight pinning me to my bed. It was cold, too. It was so cold. I've never been so cold in my life.

"Christ, Si," Jeremy shrieked. "Stop it! *Stop it! STOP IT!*"

Mr. Fuzzy was still shaking in my arms, and I hated Jeremy for that, I couldn't help it, but I tried to make myself get up anyway, I really tried. Only the dark was too thick and heavy. It seemed to flow over me, like concrete that hadn't quite formed up, binding me to my mattress with Mr. Fuzzy cowering in my arms.

Jeremy's whole bed was shaking now. He was grunting and wrestling around. I heard a *pop*, like a piece of taut rubber giving way, and a wooden *wham wham wham*. There was this liquidy gurgle and Jeremy actually screamed, this long desperate scream from the bottom of his lungs. I really had to admire the job he was doing, as much as I couldn't help being mad. He'd never taken it this far. It was like watching a master at the very peak of his form. There was another one of those liquidy thumps and then the sound of the hammer and then the whole thing happened again and again. It happened so many times I lost track. All I knew was that Jeremy had stopped screaming, but I couldn't remember when. The only sound in the room was this muffled thrashing sound, and that went on for a little while longer and then it stopped, too. Everything just stopped.

It was so still. There wasn't any sound at all.

The dark lay heavy on my skin, pinning me down. It was all I could do to open my mouth, to force the word out —

"Jeremy?"

I waited then. I waited for the longest time to hear that stupid Vincent Price laugh of his, to hear Jeremy telling me he'd gotten me this time, he was only joking, *Mwah-ha-ha-ha-ha*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But the laugh never came.

What came instead was the sound of someone chewing, the sound of someone who hadn't had a meal in ages just tucking right in and having at it, smacking his lips and slurping and everything, and it went on and on and on. The whole time I just lay there. I couldn't move at all.

It must have gone on for hours. I don't know how long it went on. All I know is that suddenly I realized it was silent, I couldn't hear a thing.

I waited some more for Jeremy to make that stupid laugh of his. And then a funny thing happened. I wasn't lying in my bed after all. I was standing up between the beds, by the milk crate we used for a night stand, and I was tired. I was so tired. My legs ached like I'd been standing there for hours. My arms ached, too. Every part of me ached. I ached all over.

I kept having these crazy thoughts, too. About ghosts and hunger and how hungry Mad Dog Mueller must have been, after all those years down in the basement. About how maybe he'd spent all that time waiting down there, waiting for the right person to come along, someone who was just as hungry as he was.

They were the craziest thoughts, but I couldn't seem to stop thinking them. I just stood there between the beds. My face was wet, too, my whole face, my mouth and everything. I must have been crying.

I just stood there waiting for Jeremy to laugh that stupid mad scientist laugh of his and tell me it was all a game. And I have to admit something: I was scared, too. I was so scared.

But it wasn't the dark I was scared of.

God help me, I didn't want to turn on the light.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

We, The Publicists

"Once a book is written, often the most important individual in an author's life after the editor is the public relations person.... Stuart S. Applebaum, chief spokesman for Random House Inc...describes his job this way: 'In giving life to a book, if the editor is the midwife, then we the publicists are the neonatal nurses. All-purpose caregivers to both the newborn and the author-parent in those first six weeks.'"

— Martin Arnold, "Pitchers at the Fair," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2002.

WHEN I woke up that morning there was a strange man lying in bed between me and my wife.

The stranger hadn't been there when Esther and I fell asleep last evening, shortly after the ten o'clock news. He must have crept into the house and insinuated himself in the middle of the night with the grace and guile of a cat.

Surprisingly enough, I did not immediately scream or yell or flail about or threaten or bolt from under the covers. (The stranger, thank God, lay atop the duvet, not beneath.) My unnaturally gentle and accepting reaction had more to do with the stranger's reassuring looks and calm demeanor than with any resort to common sense.

The intruder wore a very expensive suit, remarkably unwrinkled despite his night's recumbent posture. He was a clean-shaven Caucasian, fairly young, sporting an affable grin. He boasted a very nice haircut. From his hands folded across his stomach sparkled a college ring I recognized as belonging to a Princeton grad.

Generously allowing me a few moments to compose my thoughts, the stranger continued to beam at me, his tilted face just a few inches from mine. Then he reached into a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

coat pocket and pulled out a business card.

Feeling as if I were still dreaming, I took the card. I found my specs, donned them, and read the card.

HAPWOOD S. STUTTERBALM
CHIEF PUBLICIST
RUMDUM HOUSE PUBLISHING

Stutterbalm extended his hand for a shake, and I timorously took it. "Mr. McFoozel — may I call you Ken? — it's a pleasure to meet you at last. I can't tell you how much I enjoyed your book in manuscript. It's Rumdum House's very great privilege to publish your authorized biography of Britney Spears, *She's Stoopid to Conquer*, and I'm here now and for the next six weeks to make sure we maximize all the impact and rewards from your hard work and authorial brilliance."

Of course, these were the kind of words every author dreams of hearing from his publisher, and I felt somewhat more kindly disposed to Stutterbalm, despite his unconventional entrance into my life. Still, I was at a loss as to how to treat this nocturnal intrusion.

Esther, always a heavy sleeper, moaned and mumbled, "Ken, shut the clock-radio off...." She pulled the covers up over her head, and I could see that she was going to be absolutely no help in this situation.

"Mr. Stutterbalm — "

"Hapwood, please. Or Hap. Whatever makes it easier for us to work together."

I found it impossible to raise any anger in the face of this disarming desire to accommodate me. "Well, uh, Hap, could we continue this conversation in the kitchen, please?"

"Certainly."

I slipped out of bed, scuffled into my slippers, donned my robe, and headed for the bathroom.

Stutterbalm vaulted agilely out of bed, and seemed ready to follow me into the john. He had a PDA in his hand and seemed to be inditing notes with his stylus.

"Please, er, Hap, could I have some privacy for just a moment?"

"But Ken, it's so important that I monitor all the intimate aspects of your life. There's no telling what small detail might lead to a valuable tie-in for your book. For instance, based on what brand of toothpaste or toilet tissue you use, we might be able to bring onboard a co-sponsor for your book-signing tour. We've already got you booked in forty-five cities, after all, at not inconsiderable expense."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Forty-five cities? I had needed six months to recover from my last tour, a ten-city number for my YA biography of the Russian president, *Rootin' Tootin', Sure-shootin' Putin*. What had I ever gotten myself into by accepting this latest assignment? The last female pop singer I had enjoyed listening to had been Carly Simon. I silently cursed my agent, and swore that I would never do another book on any starlet younger than seventy-two.

Stutterbalm waited patiently, stylus posed, a cocker-spaniel eagerness on his face. Forty-five cities indeed implied a certain level of sales....

"Oh, all right, you can come in. But at least turn your back while I use the toilet."

"Of course, Ken!"

In the kitchen, Stutterbalm insisted on brewing the coffee and fixing me a large breakfast, all with gourmet provisions he had brought with him. When he placed my plate in front of me, I noted that he had made no arrangement for his own breakfast.

"Aren't you going to eat too?"

"Not right now. Truly dedicated publicists generally fast during the six weeks while they're nursing a book along. I'll have a protein shake at noon. Right now we have to utilize every minute to groom and coach you for the rigors ahead. Just let me set up this camera — "

Unpacking a duffel bag he must have previously planted, Stutterbalm erected a video camera on a tripod, as well as some small studio lights. He snapped on the fixtures and I flinched at the wash of harsh radiance. He activated the camera and sat down across from me.

"We'll skip the makeup just this once. Please, Ken, eat up! This will be good practice for conducting interviews over coffee and Danish. Now, I'll play the part of the interviewer, and you just be yourself."

The mock interview lasted half an hour, during which I failed to taste a single forkful that went into my mouth. When we were done, Stutterbalm reviewed my performance in the camera's small screen, clucking his tongue all the while.

"Well, Ken, I'm afraid we have a long road to travel before you're fit to appear on national TV. For one thing, we need to do something about that haircut."

"But, but — I've been wearing my hair like this for years."

"Exactly the problem. Let me make an appointment for you for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this afternoon with my stylist." Whipping out his cell phone, Stutterbalm did just that. "Now, let's try on some new clothes I've taken the liberty of bringing."

As Stutterbalm was expertly hemming the cuffs on my new trousers, Esther drooped into the kitchen. She was taken aback at first by this impromptu fitting, but when I explained that it was all part of the publicity for my new book, she just shrugged and poured herself some coffee.

"Try some of those croissants, Mrs. McFoozel. They're from a little bakery on the Upper West Side."

"Mmmm, delicious!"

How cheaply and quickly Esther had been won over by this PR tyrant! Was I being an ingrate by harboring some small vestiges of resentment at this dictatorial treatment?

Stutterbalm erased chalk marks off my tailored jacket. "There, perfect! Now, let's see your walk, Ken. Pretend you're crossing the stage to receive a Pulitzer."

"For a biography of Britney Spears?"

"It could happen," said Stutterbalm, winking and making a money-rubbing gesture with his fingertips.

I pranced up and down the kitchen for ten minutes, trying vainly to follow Stutterbalm's suggestions about varying my stride. At last I had had enough of this vainglorious strutting, and said so.

"That's fine, Ken, we can work more on the walk later. There're plenty of other tasks to tackle. Let's see your standard signature. No, no, much too time-consuming. You want to shorten it. After all, you might be doing thousands per day."

"Th — thousands?"

"Let's work a little on your personal bio sheet. I've got the one from your last book here. The first thing we've got to change is your birth date. What say we make it, oh, 1972?"

"Do I look thirty years old to you?"

"Oh, don't worry, we've budgeted plastic surgery." Esther looked up from the newspaper hopefully. "Oh, yes, Mrs. McFoozel, for you as well."

"But I — "

"Now, about your hobbies. We've changed them to spearfishing, snowboarding and bungee-jumping. Naturally you'll need to acquire a modicum of proficiency in each of these areas."

"I can't swim! And I never go out in the snow without my galoshes."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Tut-tut, Ken. Everything will soon be different. There's nothing that can't be accomplished with a little effort and enough money. Don't underestimate my determination or perseverance. You're looking at a fellow who's driven countless producers to madness and beyond."

I collapsed into a chair. "And that's just where you're driving me! I just don't think I'm up to the level of involvement in the publicity machine that you're demanding of me."

Stutterbalm patted me tenderly on the shoulder. "There, there, Ken. We've anticipated that possibility as well. Take a look at these photos."

I studied a sheaf of headshots. "Who are all these smiling idiots?"

"Eager young actors and models looking to bulk up their CV. Any one of them will happily stand in for you throughout this whole process. A simple *Mission: Impossible*-style latex mask is all we need to fool your fans. Your signature right here makes it happen — "

The documents appeared with suspicious alacrity. But I nonetheless signed the forms as quickly as I could.

"Very good. Never let it be said that we were unwilling to give you a chance at the limelight, Ken. I'm sorry it had to end this way, but I suspected it might, based on my many years as a 'nurse' to authors. After all, as we publicists traditionally say: an actor masquerading as a writer is always a better bet than a writer masquerading as an actor."

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

IF YOU ARE PLANNING A CHANGE OF ADDRESS PLEASE NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE, AND ALLOW SIX WEEKS FOR THE CHANGE TO BECOME EFFECTIVE.

BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD AND NEW ADDRESS, INCLUDING THE ZIP CODES. PRINT CLEARLY AND, IF POSSIBLE, ATTACH AN OLD MAILING LABEL.

OR USE OUR HANDY CHANGE OF ADDRESS FORM ONLINE AT **www.fsfmag.com**

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE
Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We've been publishing Kit Reed's sharp stories for upwards of forty years now (in fact, we hope to have a complete index of the magazine on our Website by the time this issue reaches subscribers—check it out and see for yourself when Kit's first story appeared here). A longtime resident of Middletown, Connecticut, Ms. Reed draws on her Southern roots with this new tale. Ms. Reed's last novel was @expectations *and she reports that her latest,* Thinner Than Thou, *is nearing completion.*

Visiting the Dead

By Kit Reed

SOUTH CAROLINA IS nothing like Nelly thought. "Home," Mommy said, like it was going to be so great, "I'm taking you home," and she had tears in her eyes. Well, it isn't great so far. These woods are dark. The big trees drip gray moss like mummies unwrapping, fixing to run after you. Nelly hides her head as the car crunches along the oyster shell road. Astonishingly, the trees just quit at water so pale and bright that there's no line between it and the sky. It's like the edge of the world. A ruined hotel sprawls on the banks like a dying thing.

Empty rockers line the wooden porches and cement urns on the gateposts spout sprays of pale green blooms. Paper lanterns swing from the overhang and there are flowerpots and flowered cloths on the wicker tables, as though the party is just about to begin. Nobody's around.

Mommy's voice goes all brave and fluty, like she's scared. "Well, Nelly, here we are."

"What are you afraid of?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nothing! It's just been a long time." They're visiting Mommy's family for the first time since Lucille Cornwall ran away with Hal Peterson and made them all so mad that Mommy was scared to go home. They, what was it Mommy said, they cut her off without a cent. "I haven't been back since before you were born."

"Do you think they're still mad?"

Mommy's lips make a wavy line. "I don't know what they are."

They didn't come here direct. They had to stop at a florist on Bay Street. Mommy made Nelly wait in the car. She waited and waited. She thought Mommy was never coming out. Was something awful happening to her inside the store? What if she got kidnapped, Nelly wondered, what if she fainted and they were in there waiting for 911 to come? Had she gone in the front and run right out the back? Nelly didn't know. She was getting up the nerve to unbuckle her seatbelt and go looking when Mommy came out with a great big wreath with a fat white bow.

"What's that?"

She didn't explain, exactly, she just thrust it into Nelly's lap. "Here, hold this. When you can't be at your own mother's funeral, you have to come back sooner or later and make amends."

They have come all the way down here from New Jersey to make amends. Mommy said it was about mending fences, friends are friends but when you're in need, there's nothing thicker than blood, but the truth is, they didn't have anywhere else to go. She said everybody needs a place to *be*, especially Nelly now that Hal is gone. Hal is in Vegas with a new woman and this time, he won't be back. He used to be Nelly's daddy. Now he's this girl Victoria's boyfriend, is all. He cut off his mullet and left in a new forest green sports car. When he told her it was over, Mommy cried and cried. "Oh," she wailed. "Oh, oh. What am I going to do now?" That night she hugged Nelly and cried some more. "How am I going to take care of you?"

Mommy hasn't been herself since Daddy left. She and Nelly sort of mourned for weeks, getting into their jammies before supper and eating Hot Pockets in front of the TV, staying up until they jerked awake with TV light flickering on their faces and stumbled off to bed. Mommy came home sick from work one day and never went back. After a while they had to have supper in the supermarket, free samples of this and that. Then one

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

morning Mommy woke Nelly up before it got light. *Get dressed*, she said. Their bags were by the front door. *We can't go on living this way.*

When Nelly looked back, a truck was taking their furniture away. *Mom!*

If Mommy noticed, she didn't care. *We're going back to our roots.*

So far Nelly's roots turn out to be Aunt Glory, who lives in a development near the Marine base. When they drove in last night Aunt Glory was excited to see them, but there was no place for them in the house on Ribault Road, just a futon in the front room, and there was nothing to eat but Lean Cuisine. Nelly couldn't wait to get out of that tight little house.

"I wish I could keep you till you get on your feet," Glory said, "I just don't have room."

Aunt Glory is cute but she's kind of a disappointment, like she's glad to see Mommy, but Nelly is something else. She whispered, so Nelly wouldn't hear, "What am I supposed to do with her, Lucy, she's *nine*." Glory is nice but in her situation, a kid is only going to get in the way.

"Glory, I lost my job."

"Get a grip, Lucy. We'll find you a man." Aunt Glory wants Mommy to start having fun with some cute Marines she knows. Last night she said, "Come on, Luce. Hal's over. It's time."

"What about Nelly?"

"First things first. You need a life! Lucille, these guys are really cute."

"Who's going to babysit Nelly if I go out? Maybe you...."

"Can't. I've got a date."

"See what I mean?"

"Well, do something with her. In your situation, you can't afford to have a kid around." The whole time they were talking Aunt Glory thought Nelly was playing with her stuffed toys out in the car.

Mommy's words squeezed out, whispery and thin. "What am I supposed to *do*?"

"Oh hell, I don't know. But I can tell you this, Lucille. In your situation, a kid is only going to get in the way."

Before Mommy could say anything Nelly dropped Teddy and went "Ooops" just loud enough to signify that she was there.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mommy said, fast, "I didn't come to meet men, I came to make my peace."

"Oh, that. Well, you know where they all are," Glory said.

"I do."

Now they are here, although Nelly isn't sure exactly what *here* is. She thought they were going to put flowers on some grave and go. Instead they are standing in front of the wrecked old hotel, like Gramma and Grandpa are in the biggest and nicest room, just waiting for Mommy to apologize so they can invite her to stay.

Nelly isn't supposed to be here at all. Aunt Glory was supposed to keep her today while Mommy came out here and did this, but at breakfast it turned out Glory's boyfriend had stayed over and they had plans. She told Mommy this at the last minute and they had a fight. "Hell with you," Glory said. "You'll never get a fresh start with that attitude."

Mommy was distracted and miserable. "Come on," she said, shoving Nelly into the car. "Get in."

"Where are we going?"

"To pay my respects."

"What kind of respects?"

"Last respects. Oh, forget it. Don't worry yourself."

From the front stoop, Glory called, "Say hello for me."

Mommy spat, "Say hello for yourself," but not loud enough for Glory to hear. When Nelly looked back, her aunt was checking her reflection in the glass storm door; she had on a short, short skirt with flowers on it and plastic and silver lilies drooping from each ear. Bart, his name was Bart, Bart slipped into the doorway behind her and waved goodbye.

Nelly just remembered all of that, even though it was long and embarrassing, and she and Mommy are still on the bottom step. "Aren't we going in?"

"In a minute," Mommy says.

"Are you scared? Are you scared of what they'll do to you?"

"They're mad at me, but they aren't that mad."

"I thought they were dead."

Mommy does not explain. She shifts the wreath to her shoulder like a gardener carrying a hose. "You wait here."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There are gold letters on the white tails of the bow-ribbon, Nelly sees now. R., she reads. I. P. "I want to come."

"You're too young. Besides, you'll just get bored."

"Will not. I don't want to stay here."

"Well," Mommy said, "you don't want to come in either, it's all depressing. Besides, you can't."

"Why?"

"Because you aren't ready yet! There." Mommy thrusts a Gameboy at her and slaps a roll of Life Savers into her hand, what else does she have in her purse? Pills, Nelly sees, lots of pills, and she thinks she sees.... "Entertain yourself."

Nelly waits and waits. It's creepy out here. Where is Mommy, why hasn't she come out; all the old fears roll past behind her eyes: kidnappers, sudden death, mother telling her to wait and just running away. She won't know the name for it but any kid who's ever lost a parent knows — this is separation anxiety: the person who went inside is never coming out. When you give up waiting for them, what are you going to do? They'll find Nelly's bones sitting here, she'll starve to death waiting for Mommy to come back. When the Life Savers are gone she gets hungry. When she gets bored she sneaks up on the porch. She's only looking, she isn't hurting anything, what can they do to her? The place has been so quiet for so long that she whispers into the silence, "Where is everybody? Is anybody here?"

Louder. "Is anybody *here*?"

She stamps across the porch. That'll bring them out. *Thud*. If anybody comes, she can ask....

Odd, from here the water looks like pale glass that you could walk out on and the invisible horizon is just exactly where you'd disappear. If she stares at it long enough maybe she will see some person she thought was lost or gone forever, walking back into her life. This is so scary that Nelly wheels and plasters herself to the wide screen door like a swamp mosquito desperate to get in.

Nothing opens, nothing moves but in the next second she's inside. Mean of Mommy, leaving her out there. Extremely pissy, when in here there's a party going on, people are eating cookies and ginger ale and laughing, and everybody but Nelly is having a good time. Waiters go by with trays and she can see from the hall that the lobby is filled with good-looking people

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in party clothes that look old-fashioned to her — whatever their relatives picked out as their Sunday best for the big day all those years ago.

She wants to run in and join the party but she's afraid.

"Yes," a guy who looks like Ricky Martin in a sailor suit says. Nelly can't be exactly sure he's talking, any more than she's certain that she said any of the above out loud. He answers as if she has. "We're all dead."

"You don't look dead."

"Well, we are."

"But that's so *weird*."

"Not really," the sailor says. "How did you get in?"

"How did you?"

"I told you, we're all dead. It's okay, you can run away if you're scared."

"Dead people don't stay in hotels."

He gives her a sweet look. "Where else would we go?"

"Heaven?"

"Too soon to tell," he says.

A new voice says, "That hasn't been decided."

"Whether you're going?"

Laughing, a woman in a long fur coat drifts in without touching the floor. She says, "Whether there is one."

The sailor says kindly, "Nobody knows the whole truth about being dead."

"What happened to you?"

He laughs. "Pearl Harbor."

"You wish," the fur coat woman says. "He was in a car wreck outside Charleston, right before the war. Too much booze in some cheap bar."

"Prohibition Polly, dead on bathtub gin."

Nobody in this hotel matches, not the sailor, not the lady in furs nor any of the old people floating down the halls and definitely not the mean little girl Nelly sees crutching this way in an outfit that looks two hundred years old. She's scowling as if Nelly has no right to be here, but who does?

She asks, "Are you all from around here?"

"Every town has a place like this." The woman in furs looks at Nelly through a pair of silver glasses on an ivory stick. "What are you doing here?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Looking for Mommy."

The cross-looking girl isn't much older than Nelly, although she's dead. She snarls, "You mean the scared lady? She's upstairs."

"Betty, shh."

Nelly says, "She said she wasn't scared!"

"Well she was, she was bawling when she ran by."

"Which way?"

"No way," the girl says meanly. "You can't go."

"Could too."

She looks at Nelly like she's the dumbest thing on the playground. "No you couldn't, it's in the rules. You can't come visit the dead if you don't belong to them."

"But it's my grandparents!"

The girl says scornfully, "That doesn't mean anything. They don't know you. If they did, we'd know."

"Betty, that's enough," the sailor says.

Betty sticks her tongue out at him. "We know who belongs and we know who's connected, and you aren't connected. You have to be connected or you can't stay here."

Connected. Like people on a phone line, or Christmas tree lights on a string? "What do you mean?"

The child gives her a smug grin. "Only family can visit the dead."

The sailor says, "It's okay. Now that you're inside you might as well wait with us. Come on, the party's in full swing."

"But I want Mommy."

"Tough rocks."

"Betty, shh."

"I have to find Mommy."

"I'm sorry, that's not allowed," the lady in the fur coat says. There are diamonds on her fingers and glitter caught in her hair. "She has to find you."

This is so terrifying that Nelly dodges like a cornered fox and runs for the stairs. Nobody follows, maybe because nobody cares. At the top of the stairway she stands in the well of dust spinning under the skylight and waits. Mommy must be up here somewhere, at the end of the main hall or behind one of these closed doors. Some are hung with wreaths like the one Mommy brought attached to the knockers, or American flags or

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sprays of withered flowers on the sills. She's got to be behind one of these doors, but what is she doing, and which one?

"Mommy?" she calls, but not so loud that the dead will come out and chase her away. "Mom?"

Nothing. *Gramma Cornwall*? *Granddaddy*? She sends their names out in thought waves, but nothing comes back.

"Anybody?"

A thought wave rolls in. *Go away, little girl. We're dead.*

If those people downstairs are dead and everybody up here's dead, what's happening to Mommy anyway, Nelly wonders, and what's going to happen to her?

If this was TV it would turn out I was already dead.

She and Mommy could forget about their old lives in New Jersey and where they'll stay since Glory didn't have enough room. There's plenty of room here. If she and Mommy were dead, Mommy would stop crying for good; they'd never have to worry about new clothes or getting enough to eat. They could write off Mommy's bad bills and forget Hal and move in and set up housekeeping here.

But Nelly isn't dead, she is standing here in the hall with the sweat running down and her panties riding up in the crack, wondering where in this big old place her mother is and whether she can find her and if she can, how she's going to get her to leave.

She could start by peeking into every room but all the doors are closed and she's afraid to knock. She could holler but she's afraid of who may come. She could knock anyway but she's scared of who'd come and what they'd do to her. The dead people are nice enough, she thinks, but what if they hate being interrupted? What if they have family visiting from the town and the living relatives hate kids? What if the girl on crutches was right and she doesn't belong? That ugly part of her that thinks too much runs ahead: *Maybe you're here for Mommy because she's dead.* She doesn't know what to do.

Then she hears laughter from the farthest room.

"Mommy?"

God it is surprising, hearing her mother laugh like that. She hasn't been this happy since her last birthday, when Hal bought her the bracelet with the tiny diamond in the middle of a little gold heart.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mom?"

It's easy to find the room; in spite of what she thought the door is open a crack and gold light slants into the hall. For a moment Nelly thinks she's walked into heaven — Mommy in the rocker beaming happily and two sweet old people beaming back at her from a pink velvet sofa where they sit in white outfits as light and fluffy as clouds.

"Lucy, we're so glad you came." The sweet old man gives Mommy a smile that would turn anybody into an angel. "Your sister doesn't send flowers and she never comes."

Granddaddy?

"Oh, Glory," Mommy is saying, "she's a selfish cow. She knew I was hurting and she couldn't be bothered, we had to sleep on the floor. And you should have seen dinner, dinner was...."

The old lady is laughing a warm and wonderful laugh that fills the room. "Lean Cuisine."

Gramma?

"Oh sweetheart, that's terrible, we can do better than that," Nelly's grandfather says.

Her grandmother gets up, laughing, and begins to bustle. "We certainly can. My goodness, Lucy, a girl in your situation deserves better than a bed on the floor and Lean Cuisine."

"She does," Granddaddy says.

Mommy's voice brightens with hope. "You mean I can stay?"

"You mean you want to?"

The look that crosses Mommy's face is so happy that it plows into Nelly's heart like a rock. *Mom!*

"Yes," Mommy says. She has decided. "Absolutely yes."

Nelly holds her breath, waiting for her to ask: *Nelly too*?

But she doesn't. She doesn't say anything except, "I'm so glad."

"You'll always have a place with us," the grandparents say. Mommy leans in for a group hug and Nelly wants nothing more than to worm her way into the middle of this family tangle, move in and set up housekeeping and never have to leave. And to think they were so mad at Mommy before she came up here and said whatever she said that made them forgive her, and to think she was so scared. Well, she isn't scared now, she is warm and safe and laughing in this pretty, pretty room. The three of them are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cuddling and smiling so happily that Nelly's mouth waters. *Me too,* Nelly thinks, shuddering. *Me too.* She's about to speak when she looks at the table next to Mommy and sees the glass of water and the open bottle of pills.

"Mom!"

The hugging stops. Her mother and her grandparents turn. "Nelly!" her mother says.

"Oh, Mommy, pills!" She grabs the pill bottle and is lunging for the water glass when her mother grabs her wrist.

"Stop that! There aren't enough pills there for two."

Then Gramma's voice hits the air between them and cuts it in two, leaving Nelly and Mommy frozen on one side of the chasm in space, Granddaddy and Gramma on the other side. "Lucille, you never told us you had a child."

Mommy hisses, "Nelly, you can't be here. Go away!"

She can't help herself; she starts to bawl. "Mommy, Mom!"

"We can't have children here."

Mommy hits a high, anxious note. "But what am I supposed to do with her?"

"You should have thought of that before you defied us with Hal."

"I *told* you I was sorry. Oh Mother, Father, please!"

Granddaddy says, "You know there are no children here."

Girl on crutches; Nelly howls, "Are too!"

"Not *here* here," Gramma says. "Not in our room. We're beyond all that."

"Little girl, I'm sorry," Granddaddy says. "But you can't be here." Words float into Nelly's head even though he hasn't said them. *You have things to do.* She turns quickly and catches a smile just as it flies off his face.

The gap between them widens; it is as if the grandparents are on the other half of an ice floe, floating away. Everything in the room has changed. Mommy strains to close the gap but Granddaddy waves her off like a passenger on a boat that's ready to sail. "I'm sorry, you can't be here either, Lucille."

"Daddy!"

"No. You have responsibilities."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Mommy turns to Gramma, Gramma waves her off. Nelly can't tell whether she is being mean to Mommy because she's a mean person or whether she's doing it for Nelly's own good. "Now, go."

Mother is sobbing. "Mother, Daddy, please."

Together, the grandparents make a solid front, standing at the edge of nothing in their white fluffy clothes. They drift away as something pushes Nelly and her mother backward, toward the door. "Sorry, but in our situation, a kid is only going to get in the way."

Mommy makes a grab for the pills and misses. She is sobbing like a baby. "What am I going to do, what am I going to *do*?"

"You'll think of something," Granddaddy says.

The last Nelly sees of her dead grandparents is Granddaddy's wink. Then she doesn't see him anymore. The door closes on an empty room.

It takes a while for Mommy to stop crying. Waiting, Nelly studies the other doors. She'd like to go down to the lobby and find that sailor and the lady who was so nice to her; she'd like to have fun at the party before she has to go but she can't leave Mommy here. A family — alive, she thinks — a family from town is coming up the stairs.

"Somebody's coming," Nelly says, because her mother is still crying.

Her mother sobs, "What are we going to do?"

Words kite into Nelly's head from somewhere else: *You'll think of something*. She says, "You'll think of something, right?"

"I'll think of something." Mommy snuffs up the tears and runs her knuckles under her eyes to wipe away the rest.

"What, Mommy?" Nelly is waiting, excited and hopeful. She came this far and got her mother back and if she can just get her moving maybe they'll find a way to make it through. "What?" she cries. "Mommy, what?"

"Don't know yet." And in the second before the folks from town reach the top of the stairs, Lucille counts on her fingers like a person making a list. She looks up. "But let's go," she says in a voice that is neither nice nor nasty, just resolved. On the stairs they brush past a family with a picnic hamper and a floral offering. "Excuse us," Mommy says quickly, "we're going now."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FILMS

KATHI MAIO

DON'T DRINK THE WATER

I HAVE always suspected that *Peter Pan* (play, book, Broadway musical, film, or cartoon) packs more of a punch with adults than with the kiddies. Children enjoy the thrill of flight and daring swordplay in *Peter Pan*, but it is the adults who can deeply feel the wisdom and melancholy of Wendy's decision to grow up and plant her responsible feet squarely and irrevocably on terra firma.

And I feel the same way about Natalie Babbitt's modern children's classic, *Tuck Everlasting* — a slight novel that has sold more than 1,750,000 copies since its 1975 debut. More pastoral and less adventurous than J. M. Barrie's Edwardian masterwork, Babbitt's gentle fantasy also relates the experiences of a young girl who resists the charms of a dashing lad, and the promise of a never-ending childhood.

Like Wendy, *Tuck*'s ten-year-old heroine, Winnie Foster, also chooses to reject eternal youth and makes a conscious, active decision to live out her life as a "natural child." Adults know the sacrifice involved. But do children?

Set aside the blessed mortality-denial that most children are able to maintain until sometime in their teens. (You know, that golden belief in your own well-being that allows for the temporary terrors of nightmares and movie goblins, but doesn't convince you that skateboarding down a stair-railing toward a busy street — without a helmet — is tempting fate.) Childhood is the act of boldly moving upward and outward. For most kids, the idea of being frozen in time as a youngster is at *least* as horrific as meeting up with Freddy Krueger.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Children *long* for the perceived power and independence of adulthood. It's their parents who look back and wish, like Wendy's mother, that they could freeze their children as toddlers. And it's dissatisfied grown-ups, like the hero of ABC's short-lived fantasy series last fall, *That Was Then*, who yearn to relive their adolescence.

Perhaps, then, the fact that I was well into my adult years when I read Babbitt's story actually enhanced my appreciation of it. It is certainly grown-ups like librarians and teachers who introduce the novel to younger readers...which makes the continued popularity of a story that rather pointedly extols the inevitability (and rightness) of death a bit easier to fathom.

It is also adults who make motion pictures, of course. Which may account for the fact that two film versions of Babbitt's novel have been made in the last twenty-five years.

I doubt you've seen the first, although it is still available on VHS in some unweeded video store and library collections. The 1981 small, independent feature was directed and co-written by Frederick King Keller, who has since become a television director, working on shows like *The Pretender* and *24*.

Keller's *Tuck* most definitely shows its lack of budget. (I've read that it was made for $60,000 with limited funding coming from groups as disparate as Fisher-Price Toys and the Catholic Communications Foundation.) The on-again, off-again nature of the film's Upstate New York shoot caused major continuity problems, as the forest setting shifts from green leaves to bare branches and back to autumnal color from one scene to the next. Likewise, the cast is far from star-studded. The acting borders, in fact, on the severely amateurish. (Keller's father, Fred, Sr., even plays one of the leads.)

Still, the homey, no-frills, bucolic look and tone of the film seem oddly suited to the story. And the stolid, faintly awkward acting lends an air of naturalism to the film's metaphysical themes.

Young Margaret Chamberlain, who plays Keller's Winnie, is a wonderfully real girlchild — as gawky and gangly as all get-out, but quite lovely just the same. Tired of the constraints of her demure Victorian childhood, she runs off into the woods of her father's property. There she meets up with good-looking teenager, Jesse Tuck. When Winnie expresses an interest in drinking from the spring at the base of an old tree, Jesse advises her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

against it in no uncertain terms. And when Jesse's family arrives on the scene, the Tucks panic and spirit Winnie away to their secluded cabin.

While a mysterious stranger in a yellow suit lurks in the vicinity, and Winnie's family frets back at home, Winnie camps out with her good-natured kidnappers and learns their incredible secret. After drinking from that woodland spring some eighty years back, the Tuck parents, their two sons, and their horse all stopped aging and became immortal.

For the Tucks, it is a relief to have a new young friend who knows their secret. For Jesse, the pre-pubescent Winnie even represents the possibility of a life-mate. He is interested in sharing his fountain of youth with Winnie — in a few years' time, that is — and insuring himself an eternal love, caught in the first blush of womanhood.

There is, it goes without saying, something uncomfortably creepy about the "romance" of *Tuck Everlasting*. But that's one of the things that I admire about Keller's more faithful adaptation of the book. I think we are supposed to find Jesse's longing for true love from a very young girl quite unsettling. Heck, the guy is really 104! Pinning his amorous hopes on a slip of a schoolgirl in a white pinafore more than borders on the pedophilic.

Just as some of the tortuous experiences of Alice on the other side of the Looking Glass are supposed to weird us out, we should perceive the attachment of Winnie and Jesse to be, on some level, unnatural and wrong. Life is out of balance, after all, with the Tuck family. As paterfamilias Angus points out to Winnie, life is a "movin' circle," but he and his family are stuck, unable to complete their cycle.

The 1981 film version of *Tuck Everlasting* stays fairly true to Babbitt's book. It plods along, even stalls at times. But there is a rustic realism to it that somehow honors the original fable. The same cannot be said of the recent 2002 adaptation, directed by Jay Russell *(My Dog Skip)*, from a screenplay by Jeffrey Lieber and James V. Hart.

Oh, there is no doubt which movie had the bigger budget. Released through Walt Disney Pictures, the Russell version sports gorgeous cinematography, handsome production design, way too much voice-over narration (by Elisabeth Shue) and more than a couple of Oscar winners in the cast. Papa Angus Tuck is played with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mumbling amiability (and an I-can't-quite-hold-on-to-it Scottish burr) by William Hurt. His kind-hearted and capable wife, sporting an Irish brogue, by way of Virginia, is played by Sissy Spacek. And the ominous Man in the Yellow Suit is played with menacing understatement by the always impressive Ben Kingsley.

It's nice to have award-winning elders in your cast. (This one also includes Victor Garber and Amy Irving as the Foster parental units.) But the key casting for any adaptation of *Tuck Everlasting* has to be the role of Winnie Foster. In one sense, Russell and his associates have made a brilliant choice. Alexis Bledel — who is so adorable, every week, as the studious and articulate Rory on the WB's dramedy, *The Gilmore Girls* — has a fresh-faced beauty that is both innocent and intelligent, as well as timeless. But Ms. Bledel is twenty years old. And although she can effectively play a high-schooler, she is most obviously *not* a ten-year-old. This throws the original dynamics of the Winnie-Jesse relationship right out the window.

No accident, that. The Disney filmmakers obviously hoped to insert a John Hughes-does-Elvira Madigan teen romance squarely in the middle of Babbitt's fantasy. To this end, they cast Jonathan Jackson (teen heart-throb of *General Hospital*) as Jesse. And then they sent Jackson and Ms. Bledel out to frolic in golden meadows and sylvan pools. There's the romantic swim by a waterfall. There's the sweet frolic with a tiny fawn in the tall grass. You get the idea. And if you don't, swelling violins gushing a tender rhapsody will bang you over the head with the idyllic import of it all.

Perhaps you can tell that I was less than happy with this particular bit of Disney revisionism.

Like Alice and Wendy and *Oz*'s Dorothy before her, Winnie is meant to be a valiant young girl, sturdy of foot, true of heart, and bound for adventure. The filmmakers at Disney betray their young heroine by defining her simply as a starry-eyed teenybopper finding and losing her first boyfriend.

More to the point, they violate the internal logic of the original story. When Winnie, in the book and first movie adaptation, decides to bestow Jesse's vial of magic water (and, hence, eternal life) on a woodland creature, instead of keeping it for herself, it makes perfect sense: Jesse is too old for her (in more ways than one) and she is too

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

young to be thinking about marriage. Meeting the Tucks, and helping to save them and their secret, is a great adventure for Winnie. But only, we feel sure, the first of many. Between the ages of ten and seventeen, you expect young Winnie to experience a hundred different things as intensely as she does her time with the Tucks. This will probably include at least a half dozen future suitors. Jesse is destined to become simply the first teenaged boy she ever had a crush on. He'll be a sweet memory, but not her life-partner. (This fact might be a tragedy for the lonely, outcast Jesse, but not for Winnie.)

In the Disney version, the basic plot is similar to Babbitt's, but makes less sense. Here, Winnie is the contemporary of the always-seventeen Jesse. The film has taken pains to set Jesse up as a perfect dreamboat — a world traveler and one hell of a kisser. What's not to love, now and forever? If a teenaged girl, like Disney's Winnie, were given the chance to run away with her beautiful boyfriend and live happily ever after (literally), she would most likely say "Screw that circle-of-life crap, I'm outta here." She'd bolt down a full glass of enchanted water so fast, she'd probably choke on it. (But, luckily, since she would now be invincible, this would no longer be a problem.)

It's a waste of a perfectly good fantasy fable, but should we expect any less from the heirs of Uncle Walt?

My theory is that *Tuck Everlasting* (2002) betrayed its story in search of a solid target audience. The script was too boring and ponderous for children, too sappy and sentimental for most adults. And, let's face it, teen boys wouldn't be caught dead at this one, no matter how many shootings and manhunts were added. So the mouse-eared marketeers decided they needed to bank on the romantic impulses of teenaged girls.

The demographic research may be solid, but it just doesn't result in a satisfying movie.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the lingo Down Under, a "three dog night" is one that's so cold you need three dogs in bed with you for warmth. In F&SF lingo, a three Reed issue is one that's interesting, well-crafted, and includes the unexpected. (Then again, we like to think most issues meet those terms.) Our third Reed this month is marking his debut as a fiction writer with this story. He lives in Salt Lake City and is currently completing a degree in Film Studies at the University of Utah and hopes to have a career in the evolving medium of interactive storytelling — (i.e., persistent world online games). As "Shutdown/Retrovival" indicates, he's very interested in the social consequences that this kind of entertainment will have as it becomes more commonplace, and in the social responsibilities of those creating it. —

Shutdown/Retrovival

By Aaron A. Reed

HE HAD BEEN RAISED IN THE impossibly tall asteroid forests of Ebb, flitting between crystalline trees on invisible wings while the Galactic Core seared the skies above him. Years later, firing at a line of redcoats or hunting with his pride on the plains of New Africa, he could still feel phantom tinglings from those wings in the moments before sleep, though they had long since been abandoned in favor of less juvenile forms. And yet often he realdreamed of drifting through a million scintillating branches, the only sound his racing heart.

Now, Ebb was only a memory, lost in the gulf between Shutdown and Retrovival. He had moved from world to world since his father's death, never claiming a home, just another flitboy on the fringe of the new. He was there when Zor opened, racing through its ultragreen planetoids in old-style jetplanes. He was first through the portal to Atlantis 2, swimming gracefully through the city while the rest of the newbies were just flexing their gills. And he was usually the first to tire and start to multiBe, another ghost looking for the next big thing, sampling lights and colors

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and sounds and tastes from other worlds while his avatar became vacant and listless.

His father had named him Tamor, in the style of Ebb. He had hated it once he'd grown old enough to realize it tied him to a single, clichéd world. In his teens he had registered the truename Dez'Plx+0K, though he used it less and less as he matured. Now, he had let it lapse, and he had no truename, his moniker changing with his body in each new world he entered. He disliked truenames and distrusted those who bore them. A truename implied a true self, and he did not believe one existed.

It was in the royal court of Kae'Sli when he first met her. He had taken the form of a mysterious older baron from an obscure island state, politicking with the dukes and baronesses, trading gossip and news: though he had visited Kae'Sli several times, he had never adopted a permanent identity. Some reveled in the banalities of court gossip and political backstabbing, but such nonsense bored him, occupying only part of his attention as he multiWent elsewhere.

Today he was focusing more or less entirely on the court. His avatar of a sunfish swimming through the garden-pools of Zen Prime, though relaxing, occupied little of his mental energies. Web-born could multiBe three or four places at once, but growing up on Ebb alone had kept his mind from fragmenting well, though not for lack of trying.

"Perdon," he heard, as a soft hand touched him on the shoulder. He turned.

She was wearing a radish-green dress with a crystal turban, somewhere above the height of current Kae'Sli fashion. Her avatar was attractive, like most of the ones in the room, but not to the inordinate extent of one seeking only sex.

"Su?" he vocalized.

"Quer, meseek accomp to Regula. You?"

He activated the enterface and lookupped her. Not a pseudotar; but like him, she had no truename and hence, no history.

It was abrupt, to be sure, but Kae'Sli was already growing old and he had never Been in Regula. On Zen Prime, he darted playfully through a warm current.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Su," he smiled, and held out his hand.

She smiled back, and took it.

For years he had lived and breathed the gamezones, racing, puzzling, fighting, killing for fleeting fame, along with millions of others. But he tired of the false victory and false defeat, and drifted toward more dangerous pursuits. He visited punishment worlds. He simmed pain. Once he met some zonehackers, and Was with them long enough to see one realkilled by an enforcer. He severed his connection to that world and never returned.

Now, he flitted. He was already near the age when his father had settled down, had homelanded on Ebb, never to leave. His father had loved Ebb, and had tried to instill in his son a love for its phantasmagoric beauty, too. But long before he was no longer Tamor, the boy could not imagine loving any single world enough to be exiled there, cut off from the infinite possibilities that awaited him through the Exit link.

He had never been interested in mating, the frighteningly random and tedious process by which he had been created. Far more appealing was the art of programming artificial life for a new world, for a companion, or as a pseudotar to release into the web, a free being. But he had never been willing to invest the time it took to learn such skills.

Nor was he interested in the ways most passed their time. He despised the sexers, flitting from orgasm to orgasm on six worlds at a time, multiFucking whenever they weren't asleep. Neither was he interested in the Sportworlds, with their racing, gambling, and gladiatorial combat. The dreamers bored him, living in worlds without cause and effect, without consequence or reason, and the celibors frightened him with the intensity of their deathly serious religious monasticism.

Most eventually found a little nook they could Be in, and would homeland or at least return there often enough to be pseudohomelanders. Most became content, complacent, stagnant in their chosen world, while they waited to realdie.

But some, like him, did not.

On Regula you became a being of pure energy, which made avatar creation unnecessary. So, while they waited to Enter, he lookupped the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

backstory. The Regulans had once had a technologically advanced civilization, before they had transcended their physical forms to become brilliant points of light whose color shifted with mood and environment. Now, they drifted through the tall spires of their abandoned cities and sculpted landscapes, collaborating on freeform works of art, massive holograms floating in canyons or above cityscapes, constantly shifting in structure and theme as artists joined and left the work. It was pure masturbatory nonsense.

But he humored her, following her scintillating form from one street to another until they found a new creation, phased light crawling up the side of a dizzying tower with the help of a dozen or so Regulans. They joined the artists, and to his surprise he found himself enjoying the work, waking up old creative urges that hadn't been utilized in years. He felt her manipulations clearly over the listless noise of the others, and could tell that she felt his. Before long they were dominating the work, creating bold new structures and radical color schemes, molding the throbbing light waves around and around the tower, endlessly.

They sexed in a vertical cathedral, sterile and abandoned. On Regula it was brilliant, piercing, the energies of each avatar sparking and twisting together and around each other like liquid lightning.

It was only afterward that he realized his sunfish on Zen Prime had expired. He had forgotten to breathe.

THOUGH THE SPECIFIC day he first got the idea to link to Reality was uncertain, he knew he had been wandering through the Library, an unnecessary and poorly made interface to netdata, pulling random books off shelves and skimming through them mindlessly. He was looking for inspiration, solace, answers to questions he could not even come close to phrasing.

He knew about Reality, of course. Everyone did. It was the prison that mankind had been born into, a Hell of unbending rules, unchanging forms, and unhappy people, slaves to the constant needs of their physical bodies. The human race had escaped it, sometime before his father was born, and had never looked back. He had assumed, along with the rest of his generation, that the link had been severed long ago.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But as he skimmed through volumes of esoterica about the inner workings of the enterface, he discovered an old command that would do the unthinkable: shut down all your neural connections to virtuality, disconnect you, eject you, and somehow return you, impossibly, to Reality.

It was a horrifying concept, and he started to put the book back on the shelf. But the idea gripped hold of him with a sudden thrill, and in that instant he realized that he was dangerously close to suicide; that if he couldn't Be somewhere fundamentally different than the endless multitude of worlds and forms soon, he would eventually find the carefully guarded portal labeled Self-Termination and activate it.

As he stood there, holding the ancient tome in his hand, he realized that this had the potential to be far more interesting.

She was his muse, his passion, his god. He followed her from world to world, through an endless parade of forms. She fascinated him in a way nothing before ever had. For the first time in years, he felt no desire to multiGo elsewhere, and he focused all his attention on whatever world they occupied together. Perhaps it was the fragility of the relationship...with no truenames, either of them could leave at any instant, with no chance of ever being found by the other. He was often seized by an irrational fear she was about to do just that, that each beguiling smile would be the last, that each new coupling would be remembered like the end of a realdream, perfect clarity from sudden interruption.

But each time she spoke the name of a new world, when he Went there she'd always be waiting. And it was always she who decided — for no reason he could discern — to go. They would be at a banquet, or cresting a phantridge, or sculpting clouds when she would announce their imminent departure. He didn't mind. He was intoxicated by her. He would have followed her anywhere.

Most of the time they didn't speak, even when their forms allowed them to. But once, in a lavish gondola floating down the Nile, his curiosity became too intense to ignore.

They were again playing the game of wealthy nobles, though this time in the more interesting world of Ancient Egypt. The high priests of Amûn were invading, and he had played a powerful sorcerer defending his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pharaoh, she his brave courtesan. Now they drifted back to the palace, attended by loyal servants unfailing in their pre-programmed devotion.

He gazed down at her smooth dark skin as she lay in his lap with eyes closed.

Where did you come from? he said, and his form spoke "Tashiach di khalesh?" She smiled, dreamily, one hand dipped in the cool river.

"Al maat tshaleh ku shichueke ta," she said languidly. The enterface told him it meant *Somewhere beyond your comprehension.*

The gondola drifted on as the river sparkled in the light of the low, red sun.

WEEKS OF DELIBERATION followed the discovery. He had pulled up the Eject command, and there it sat, just as described, looking as innocuous as any other portal. Only this world would have no rules, no codes, no backstory. This was different.

He scanned through old data tomes and discovered hints of a time when people moved back and forth between the two realities — virtual and real. He learned a bit about how his universe actually worked, knowledge that had dimly accumulated in his mind now given focus and specificity. He saw how the gray matter of his brain was stimulated through something called a mind link, how the body was kept alive through a food drip, how the muscles were electrically stimulated to be ready for use if their owner needed them.

Was it all really there? Did it still exist? It all seemed so incredibly tenuous, like a poorly written dream. He could hardly believe that he could Be somewhere and have no knowledge of it. And there was fear, too — what would happen if he triggered the portal and nothing was there? The systems had been in place, years before, but there was no way to know if they still functioned.

He knew that he had been born, somehow, but his earliest memories were of Ebb. How a physical being had come into existence from the virtual coupling of his parents was a mystery to him. He dug deep through the archives and found strange, old words. Insemination. Biomation. He understood little and believed less. There was no proof of any of this, nothing he could see, feel, touch.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Humanity must have abandoned all of this unpleasantness years before, must somehow have devised a way to migrate completely into the virtual realm. But if such a change had taken place, he thought uneasily, wouldn't the Eject command have been deleted?

The portal remained, taunting him. It must lead somewhere.

It might be suicide. It might be insane. But — it would Be. Really Be. The way nothing he'd ever experienced was or ever would be.

Abruptly, he decided. Before he had time to reconsider, he triggered the portal, and was ejected into Reality.

Soon their pace increased, and there would be less and less time spent in each world before she would announce that they were leaving for a new one. So it came as a surprise when they spent a whole day in a period American South sim, relaxing in the cool fall air on a rustic plantation, dancing in the evening in a quaint ballroom filled with other visitors.

She was wearing a pale pink dress, he a dark suit to match his form's eyes. Hers were a brilliant green.

They danced to old tonal music along with a crowd of others. The party was hosted by an aged homelander, who had spent years recreating the plantation from ancient records. The world was so formulaic it would have been embarrassing in any other context, but in her presence he never seemed to mind, gaining a fresh perspective that made even the most tired worlds seem invigorating.

The dance ended, and he held her close, breathing in the peculiar scent of her long, flowing hair. He was happy — inexplicably, unconditionally happy.

"I have a secret," she whispered in the sim's drawn-out dialect. "Would you like to hear it?"

He pulled back and gazed at her, surprised. "Yes," he said, simply.

She eyed him coyly. "I'm not like you."

He gazed back, perplexed.

She leaned forward to whisper in his ear, "I'm from Reality."

Pain, a million tiny aches and pains. A yawning sensation of emptiness. A strange smell, unpleasant. Stabbing gray light. A greasy smoothness

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pressing into his back. A hum, persistent, annoying, coming from somewhere nearby.

He had arrived. This was Reality.

Slowly, unsteadily, he sat up. The room was cold; sputtering fluorescent lights dimly illuminated the bare concrete walls. He rubbed his eyes. They weren't focusing properly, and the artificial light stabbed into them like needles. He waited for a moment to see if he would feel better. The moment passed.

He tried to get his bearings, unsuccessfully. This is real, he thought, this is *real*. His hands clenched the warm vinyl beneath him. This is *real*. But it didn't sink in, it didn't have any impact. He couldn't make himself believe it was anything but an unpleasant world he was simming while searching for a new one to flit to.

Carefully, he began removing his attachments. They were just like the ones described in the records: mind link, tugging gently on his bald skull before letting go; catheter, food drip, muscle tensors, medstat. He draped them all over a nearby hook, then slowly stood to his feet, swaying, unsteady.

Weight pressed him: it had been a long time since he'd simmed a full-G world in human form. But it was no more than an annoyance — his muscles had been kept in prime condition. All for this moment, he thought idly, probably the only time I'll ever use them.

As his eyes turned to the rest of the small room, he started as he realized he wasn't alone. The room was jammed with other tables, and on each lay a form, humans in simple gowns with gray, flaky skin, sagging flesh, bedsores, expressions of stupor.

A thought grew in the back of his mind, vaguely terrible and portentous. He tried to shake it off, but it persisted, just out of reach of his consciousness. It was only when he glanced down at his own gown that it hit him.

This was no avatar, no form. This was him. This was his self — his trueself.

He stared into her eyes as a shudder passed through his body. "You shouldn't joke about such things," he said with a sudden harshness.

"But it is not a joke," she said, wide-eyed. "I was born in a city called Paris."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Paris is a subworld," he responded quickly, "I Went there once, years ago."

She stared up at him with a hint of a smile. "No," she breathed, "I mean the real Paris."

He looked down at her, stunned. She smiled openly, now, waiting for him to make the next move. The band began playing a waltz, and forms began dancing around them, merrily.

"But there isn't anyone in Reality anymore," he stuttered, "It was abandoned, long ago."

"Why, not at all!" she said playfully. "In fact, the real people vastly outnumber the virtual ones. It's just that you forgot all about us, though we never forgot about you."

She grabbed his hand and started moving her feet to the waltz. He blindly followed, his mind still struggling to comprehend what she was saying.

"We realized one day," she continued conspiratorially, as if describing a particularly interesting portal, "that you were all long gone, that the numbers that ran our world meant nothing without you there to enforce them. We realized what we could do with the technology and energy used to run your dream worlds. And we realized how powerless, completely and absolutely powerless you were to stop us from taking them."

She twirled him around the dance floor, gazing up at him with giddy glee.

"We mean to kill you all," she whispered.

HE TRIED TO PULL UP a selfimage and panicked for a moment before remembering he had no enterface. If he wanted to find out what he looked like, he'd have to find a more primitive representation. A glance confirmed what he'd suspected: the room was unadorned, except for the beds and their disquieting occupants. He focused his attention on a small gray door.

He reached it and staggered through. His muscles didn't seem to work quite right — there was a lag, a gap between his orders to move and their compliance, what seemed an almost reluctant compliance. Stumbling into a dim hallway, he shivered in a cold draft that ran along it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The hall stretched beyond the ability of his maddeningly unfocused eyes to see. Small blue-gray doors receded into infinity, each apparently identical to the last. There was no reason to take a single step in either direction, to risk losing his room and the link back to his reality. Except — some ten paces down — was that a window?

Lurching, struggling with his infuriatingly disobedient body, he pulled himself over to the small dark rectangle — only blackness outside, perhaps night — and stopped before it. His eyes slowly racked into focus on the shape reflected back at him. The moment they finally did was burned into his memory with an intensity greater than any Playback.

Reflected in the surface before him was a man with a slight gray body. The puffy eyes and sallow skin were expected, though still a shock to see. It was the facial features that stopped him cold. A hooked nose. Large forehead. Small, beady eyes. Thin ears.

Though he hadn't known what to expect, he had nevertheless expected something. His subconscious had prepared for a spark of recognition, of familiarity, of identity.

This was a stranger.

He raised his hand toward the mirror and the stranger did also.

A wave of nausea washed over him as he staggered back, eyes locked with the identical pair in the dark reflection. *This is you*, a merciless voice taunted, prancing around his head, *this is the Real You.*

The cracking walls seemed to close around him. He gasped for air, inhaling dry, rotten lungfuls rapidly.

He wanted to rip this strange body off, this unfamiliar face that stared back at him in horror, grasp the flesh and tear it until a shimmering faerie emerged, or a muscled Neoman. This body, this hideous unchangeable container for his mind, repulsed him. *What did you expect*? the voice taunted, and in a flash of sudden insight he realized he'd expected his childhood form from Ebb, gossamer wings sprouting from his back after all these years.

Old medical diagrams he'd seen in his research bubbled to the surface of his memory: images of slimy organs churning around inside him, a throbbing heart pumping thick, warm blood through his veins.

A wave of cold sickness spread over him. He convulsed violently, bending forward and breaking his death gaze with the stranger. Green

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

liquid erupted from his mouth, burning his throat, burning his nose. He choked and coughed as it splashed against the carpet. Inside he screamed.

He ripped away from her arms and staggered back, bumping some of the other dancers who flashed him looks of annoyance. He stared at her in horror as she stood there, smiling in her pretty pink gown, and tried to understand why he still loved her so much.

"What are you talking about?" he shouted. "Why should you want to kill us?"

Her smile widened. "This might be hard for you to grasp," she teased, "living here in your paradise, so distant from reality — "

"I've been to Reality," he choked, the memories flooding back in a sudden flash, "I've Been there."

"Have you?" her eyes widened, her prepared speech momentarily derailed, "Have you indeed?"

She looked into his face. He stared back in remembered horror.

"Yes, perhaps you have," she murmured.

Stepping forward, she pressed herself against him. "While you were there," she said softly, "I wonder if you stopped to consider where all you saw came from? You can't just dream things in reality, you know. People have to build them. Did you wonder where that immersion table came from? Who paid for the electricity to run your systems? Hmm?" Her Southern drawl teased him, taunted with barely concealed contempt.

His mind whirled. "I — I didn't really — "

"Of course you didn't," she said smoothly, "none of you have."

He pushed her back in a flash of sudden anger. "And why should we?" he shouted, "Why should we care about you? You mean nothing to us!"

The dancers were stopping, staring at the spectacle. The musicians, who were just part of the sim, played on.

Oblivious to the stares, or perhaps invigorated by them, she spoke slowly, deliberately. "Your grandfather, or great-grandfather, was once a very wealthy man in Reality. He made it possible through a trust fund for his heirs to live comfortably in VR, indefinitely. *My* grandfather and great-grandfather were paid a small part of this sum to take care of your bodies, to feed the machines you lived in, to run the plants that powered them."

She turned her head now to the gathered crowd, confused, scoffing,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

worried. "It didn't cost much. As the wealthy all departed for their virtual paradise, the economy slowly collapsed, and we had to take whatever work was left. And soon, there was really only one kind of work left to do."

He stared at her, hypnotized by her voice, her eyes, her body, struggling to understand what she was saying.

"Your economists had it all figured out," she continued, "all down to the last decimal place. They had already spent too long outside of Reality, lost in abstractions, to recognize the flaws in their figures. They expected their perfect system would keep running for all eternity." She smiled thinly. "But it won't."

Words found their way to his form's lips. "Why are you telling me this?"

She looked at him with an expression that was almost pity. Slowly, she stepped back up to him, lifted a hand to his cheek, caressed it. "We hacked into your mind," she said gently, "programmed you to love me with the innocence and intensity of a school boy. Then I led you from world to world, one for each server, staying long enough for our virus to completely infect each one. Very soon now, it will activate, and you will all be Ejected, permanently."

HE COLLAPSED backward, crawling back toward the door in a panic. Something was wrong with his body, he thought dully, it wasn't responding correctly at all. The image of the small, innocent-looking Exit link bounced sickeningly through his mind. One day, he hoped, they'll upgrade the enterface and delete it: sever the last link between mankind and its ugly biological past. "Real" was a dirty word already in some worlds; eventually it would become taboo. The few worlds that taught history would be destroyed, the records lost; mankind, in all its beautiful, multi-formed, virtual splendor would be free from the horror of flesh.

People were screaming. Many had disappeared, flitting away like scared insects, while others took on a glazed, panicked look as they multiWent elsewhere to try to find some reassurance that this was all a joke, a new horrorsim that they'd accidentally Gone to.

She ignored them, and kept her eyes locked on his. "Most of your

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ancestors opted not to pay for muscular maintenance," she said, "so most of you will die within hours. The rest will be back in Reality, along with me." She took a satisfied breath. "I'm going home."

His mind reeled, overflowing in a cacophony of panicked emotions. *No!* was the only word that finally made it to the lips of his form, first in a scream, then in a series of stunned, pathetic moans.

For a moment, she seemed to soften. "You'll live," she said, "if you've been to Reality before you'll live. You're one of the lucky ones. It won't be as bad as you think."

Traces of remembered nausea gripped his body, and he struggled to vocalize. The enterface did its best to translate his ramblings into the dialect of a polite Southern gentleman. "You mustn't send me back there," he begged, "please! I won't go back to Reality!"

Her eyes turned cold. "You think we're concerned with what *you* want? You think we'll shed a tear for one of you," she choked the last words with sudden fury, "*who doesn't get what he wants*?"

Something was wrong with the musicians. They were moving far too fast, and the music was staggered, breaking up and reversing, the parts out of order. The walls of the dance hall seemed to be slowly receding, and the floor was bending, changing shape like a liquid avatar.

Composing her features, she stepped back. Looking around the room, she smiled again and spread her arms wide. "It's happening," she said. "The game is ending."

FINALLY HE FELT the chill of the doorframe at his back. Gasping with gratitude, coughing up more acid, he turned and stumbled inside. He crawled past the corpses on their slabs, crawled toward his own coffin and the promise of his beautiful heaven. Collapsing on the immersion table, his fumbling fingers reconnected the attachments. The mind link warmly hugged his skull as he slipped it on.

Relief such as he had never felt washed over him. He flopped back onto the table and, triumphantly, triggered the Entry button.

The remaining people were huddled in a group, staring with horror at the collapsing world around them. The musicians had dissolved into a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

horrendous cacophony of noise, screeching through and piercing the air in a symphony of chaos.

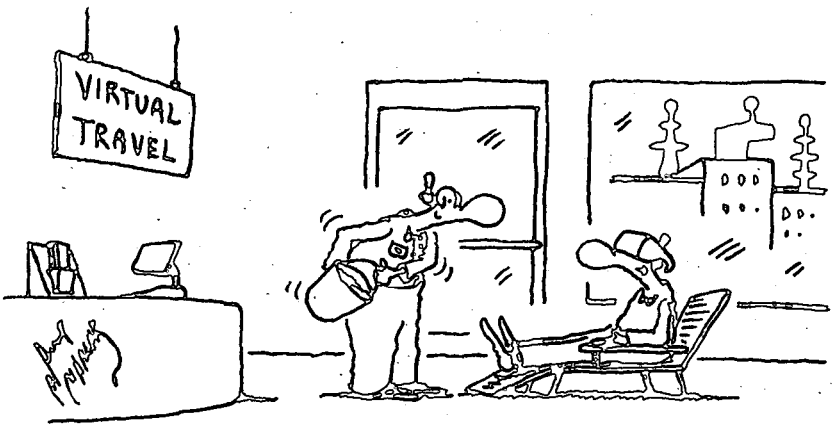
He pulled up the enterface; it was sluggish and off-balance, but was still functioning. He navigated through the portals as fast as he was able, till at last he found the one he wanted.

She was standing in the center of the ballroom when he focused on her again, eyes closed and arms stretched wide, gown swirling as virtuality melted away around her.

"I love you," he whispered, and activated the *Self-Termination* portal.

The system started up; routines initialized; connections were made. A moment of void; and then — a rush, a sudden, giddying rush of brilliant light....

He was home. ☙



"Wow! This beach is so life-like."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Larry Connolly lives in the Pittsburgh area and draws on the locale frequently in his fiction. His last story for us, "Great Heart Rising" (Jan. 2002), portrayed the actual spirit of the area coming to life. Now he ventures into the Downtown area on a harrowing trip that one wouldn't want to try in real life. (Kids, don't try this at home.)

Mr. Connolly teaches writing and literature at the Sewickley Academy and reports that he'll also be lecturing at Seton Hall University this year. In the past, his short fiction has appeared in anthologies and magazines such as Beyond the Last Star, HandHeldCrime, Terminal Fright, *and* The Twilight Zone *and his story "Traumatic Descent" is currently in development for film treatment.*

Decanting Oblivion

By Lawrence C. Connolly

SHE SAW THEM RACING toward her as she pedaled south on Smithfield. Shirtless, gaunt, bloody, they cut across her path in eerie silence — a flood of emaciated figures running through the empty Friday-evening streets of Pittsburgh.

One of them paused, sizing her up as the others blurred behind him. His lips clenched, revealing notched teeth in blackened gums. He seemed about to speak, but instead he turned, showing her the back of his head as he rejoined the stream of pumping legs and slapping feet.

Something protruded from the base of his skull.

She reached for her transmitter, pressed the talk button, and spoke into her headset. "Nix to dispatch."

Nix was short for *Double Nickels*. Her other nicknames were *Speed Limit* and *Speed*. All but the last referred to her courier number: 55.

The runners kept coming, churning past her like a river of dark flesh, darker wounds, and pitch-black eyes.

"Nix to dispatch! Talk to me, Bryan!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bryan owned Hilltop Couriers, which he operated out of a renovated Mt. Washington home. He employed a staff of dispatchers during peak shifts. After hours, he ran things on his own.

"Dispatch. Go ahead, Nix."

"Go to your window, Bryan. Look toward Smithfield."

Bryan's home sat on a bluff across the dark waters of the Monongahela. His office windows offered a panoramic view of the 800-acre patch of land that formed the western edge of the city — the triangular-shaped downtown known as the Golden Triangle.

"What's going on, Nix?"

The people kept running, funneling into the tight confines of Hobbs Way.

"Just look, Bryan!"

She heard him getting up, breathing angrily into his headset as he crossed the room and panned his tripod-mounted binoculars. "What am I looking for, Nix?"

The runners lost their definition as they spilled between the walls. They faded to pulsing shadows, becoming black waves in a pocket of night. Another beat, and they were gone.

"You missed it, Bryan. There were all these people."

"People I can see anytime."

"No. Not like these. They came out of nowhere. And they looked like — " She paused, realizing what he must be thinking.

"You feeling okay, Nix?"

"Yeah."

"You clean?"

"You know I am."

"Just checking. You'd tell me, wouldn't you? If you were sliding back — "

That's when it hit. Silent thunder — a rumble that registered in Nix's flesh but not her ears. Hairs bristled on her forearms. Prickles rose along her neck. In her bones, she felt the dissipating roar of something beyond sound....

She knew the sensation. She had felt it before, had even researched it in that other life that she had been forced to put on hold. But why was she feeling it here?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nix braced herself as the tremors left her bones. A moment's calm, and then the rumble came again. This time she was sure. The waves were coming from Hobbs Way.

"Nix? You all right?" Bryan couldn't feel the concussions. His hilltop home put him well out of range. She considered what he must be thinking, looking down at her as she quaked silently against her handlebars. "Talk to me, Nix."

The wave passed. She straightened up, cocked her foot against the pedal, and kicked off toward the source of the silent thunder. "Gotta check on something."

Sirens wailed behind her, racing in from the east.

"Check what, Nix?" His voice filled with static as she slipped into the high-walled alley. No colors here. Only the variegated grays of dusty asphalt and dusky shadows.

The emaciated figures stood in the thickening gloom, pressing together in the alley's center: bodies meshing like clouds, limbs entwining like mist. And it was then, as she reached for the switch on her helmet light, that the silent roar came again. And this time, Nix found herself at ground zero.

Her reflection hovered against the transparent side of a one-way window. She looked exhausted. Eyes like piss holes. Mouth a lipless line. Still, she looked better than the test subjects beyond the glass.

There were twelve of them. A half-dozen grad students, five laid-off flight attendants, and an out-of-work bank teller. Each would earn $300 for completing four days of testing. Between tests they could eat, watch DVDs, play cards, and take cold showers. What they could not do was sleep.

At the moment they were building Lego cars — four-wheeled rectangles that took five seconds to assemble. Each subject sat at a small table with two shoeboxes. The job involved taking a rectangular body from one box and wheels from the other. Four snaps and the finished car went into a pile beside the table. It was easy work, even for people whose minds were fried from exhaustion.

Nix turned from the window, checking the digital graphics on her computer screens. The subjects all wore MEG caps that provided enhanced

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

magnetoencephalographic images of their sleep-deprived brains. At the moment, the brains showed only light activity in their prefrontal cortices. Nix recognized the condition: Automatic Behavior Syndrome, the state when exhaustion knocks consciousness off-line, leaving the body to run on muscle memory and reflex. Nix had more than a professional relationship with the condition. During the last few months, she and ABS had become inseparable, bound fast by the demands of her daytime studies and nightlong research.

She checked the clock. Four twenty-eight A.M. The core team wouldn't arrive until 9:00. She was on her own until then. Just herself, the subjects, ABS, and her new associates Bennie and Meth — stimulants that she truly believed she could handle. After all, if a psychology major couldn't handle some substance use without letting it turn to abuse, who could?

A groan pulled her back to the moment. She looked up to see one of the subjects, former bank teller Sara Woo, staring at the glass, making one-way eye contact from the mirror side of the window. Nix touched the intercom. "You all right, Sara? Need a break?"

Sara stared unresponsively. And then it hit, a silent rumble that moved through Nix like a vibrating wave.

She gripped the console as the test subjects fell against their workstations. They looked dazed, more confused than frightened.

"Everyone okay?" Nix stood. "Stay in your seats. I'm coming out."

They just stared, gazing blankly at their reflections as Nix crossed to the booth's door. She reached for the knob, but it slipped from her fingers as another blast threw her back into the tiny room. She tried catching the chair. The backrest swiveled. She went down, falling toward the video monitors, glimpsing screens where bursts of MEG light ignited like fire across digitized cordices. The fire spread as it blurred out of her field of view. A shaved second later, she was on the floor.

Only it wasn't a floor. It was pavement. Grit shifted beneath her hands. She opened her eyes. Above her, walls tapered toward a darkening sky. Close to her ear, something hummed — a soft whirring, like a repeating whisper of wind. She turned toward it.

A few feet away, her bike lay on its side, its rear wheel spinning in empty air.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She remembered her test subjects: the grad students, the flight attendants, and bank teller. But that had been months ago. This time it had been emaciated runners in a narrow street. The fresher memory drifted before her as she stared into the darkness. She could still see the runners. It was as if their image had been burned onto her retinas, flashing back at her as she blinked her eyes. The image made no sense, but there it was. She saw them again as she had seen them when the silent blast threw her from her bike. And that was the part that made no sense. She blinked, watching again, seeing without comprehending: the runners had exploded.

To her left, something stirred: gritty footsteps approaching from Smithfield. She pulled herself up, looking toward the sound as a pair of flashlight beams converged on her face. Behind the beams, twin silhouettes stood backlit by a flashing cruiser. One of the silhouettes spoke. "You hurt?"

She tried rising to her feet.

A second voice spoke, softer than the first. "Take it easy."

Nix shielded her eyes. Two Pittsburgh cops coalesced between the beams. One officer was a man, the other a woman. Both were white.

"I'm okay." She stood.

The male officer asked, "What happened to you?"

She considered what he saw when he looked at her: a dark-skinned woman in dirty spandex, dreadlocked hair, and fingerless gloves — a suicide bomber from central casting.

Again, he asked, "What happened here?"

"Not sure." She felt it wise to avoid the whole truth. Mention of a silently exploding mob would only complicate things. In a world preoccupied with terrorist strikes, it was best to keep things simple. "I was just riding. Then I was on the ground."

"There've been reports of explosions. Hear anything?"

"No." That much was true.

"Can I see some identification?"

She dug in her wallet, hunting her courier ID, but coming out instead with her expired card from the University of Pittsburgh.

The cop put his flashlight on the card, pronouncing her name as if it were a nervous sigh: "Gati." He turned the light back onto her face. "What kind of name's Gati?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Indian." She looked right at the light, refusing to squint.

"What kind of Indian?"

"Indian Indian."

"You from India?"

"No. Pleasant Hills. My mother's parents were from Bombay."

"So that makes you what?"

"American." She didn't have time for this. She turned to the female officer. "Can I go?"

The male officer lowered his flashlight, looking again at the ID. "You a student?"

"Was."

"Now you're a courier."

"Yeah." It hurt to hear the struggle reduced to such simple terms. "Now I'm a courier."

"I need to see that courier ID," the officer said.

She looked again, digging through the crap that had accumulated in her tiny wallet: bankcard receipts, maxed-out Visa, Social Security number.... "Here it is." She pulled out her photo card.

The officer studied it. "What were you doing in this alley?"

"Cutting through."

Her headset crackled, short-band hiss giving way to Bryan's voice: "Nix! Location!"

To the cops, Nix said, "Excuse me. Gotta check in." She hit the stud on her transmitter. "Nix here. Hobbs Way."

"Damnit, Nix! What's going on down there?"

The male officer said, "That Bryan Cole?"

Nix nodded.

The officer's face lost its edge. He returned her ID and said, "Tell him you're heading back."

She pressed her talk stud. "I'm heading back, Bryan. Police escort."

"What's going on, Nix?"

"Couldn't tell you."

"You gotta know something. Downtown's been filling with cops since you ducked into that alley."

"Like I said, Bryan, I don't know anything." She raised her bike from the pavement and followed the cops toward the end of the alley.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Listen, Nix. I just got a call from a driver. He's got a package going downtown, but the cops won't let him cross the bridge. He wants to know if we can — ?"

She tugged the jack from the transmitter as she stepped toward the red-blue-red-blue glare of Smithfield Street. Bryan hated when she disconnected the headset, but she had enough going on in her brain without his voice adding to the commotion.

"We're sealing off downtown," the female officer said. "Everything west of Smithfield."

They stepped out into the strobing lights. Two vans had pulled across the entrance to the Smithfield Street Bridge. Other vehicles blocked the major intersections between Fort Pitt Boulevard and Liberty Avenue.

The female officer said, "Bomb squad's on its way. No one's found any damage, but we're not taking chances. We're asking people to leave the area or stay indoors."

Nix cocked her foot against a raised pedal. "For how long?"

The female officer tensed, her pale skin changing colors in the flashing light. "Till someone figures out what's going on."

NIX STOOD in the back of the booth while the core team studied the playbacks. On the video screen, test subjects gripped their workstations, holding tight as if the floor were shifting beneath them.

Above the video screens, MEG displays showed a dozen brains glowing with hyperactive yellows and reds.

Dr. Qualin turned, looking at Nix. "Can you remember anything else...anything that isn't on the tapes?"

"Just what I said. Two tremors. One mild. One strong enough to knock me down."

Qualin looked skeptical. He turned back to the monitors. "Let's rewind to where Gati asks Sara if there's something wrong." He spoke softly, without accusation, but Nix sensed his suspicion. Something had triggered the group reaction. Qualin seemed to think it was something she had done.

Nix turned, left the booth, and slipped into the lavatory that the test subjects had used as their washroom. The subjects were gone now, sleeping like corpses in the recovery area. Nix envied them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Three sinks stood against a mirrored wall. She walked to the center basin and wrenched the handles. Water clattered from the spigot. She leaned forward, thrusting her hands into the stream. The cold felt good. She splashed her face, holding her eyes open as the water broke across her cheeks. She had a class in less than an hour, and already she was crashing.

She leaned forward, looking at her piss-hole eyes while the door opened behind her. A concerned face looked in. It was Ellen Slater, her academic adviser, Qualin's research partner. "All right, girl?"

Nix tugged a handful of towels from the dispenser. "Nothing a week of sleep won't cure." She wiped her face.

Ellen moved closer. "Just so you know, Dr. Qualin's not pissed at you. It's the grant. He's having problems."

"Last month you said it was certain to be renewed."

"That was last month. It's a new world, Nix. We all need to be thinking military research. That's where the money's going, armed forces and homeland security."

The water in the sink grew warmer. Mist rose, fogging the mirror, softening Ellen's reflection as she leaned close. "You look exhausted, girl."

Nix shrugged. Exhaustion didn't matter. "Those tremors were real, Ellen." She turned off the water. "I didn't fall because I was tired. Something knocked me down."

Ellen gave Nix's shoulder a reassuring squeeze before backing away. "Go home, Nix. Get some sleep. Check your e-mail."

"My e-mail?"

"I'll send you something."

"Something like what?"

Ellen turned toward the door. "Something that can wait till you're rested." She opened the door. "Go home. Get some sleep. I'll send you something. We'll talk tomorrow." And then she was gone, leaving Nix leaning against the basin, torn between work and the sleep that threatened to swallow her whole.

She turned the water back on, just the cold this time. Her class started at 10:00. She reached into her pocket. The pills were there.

She cupped a hand under the spigot.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Nix found Bryan by an office window, looking at the downtown streets through high-powered binoculars. "You unplugged your headset." He spoke without turning. "I hate when you do that."

"Sorry. I had enough to deal with."

"And now you got more."

"Meaning?"

"That package." He pointed without turning. "It's on the desk."

"I didn't say I'd deliver it, Bryan."

"You didn't say you *wouldn't*. The driver needed an answer. I told him you'd do it."

"The bridges are closed, Bryan."

"Which is why it has to be you making the delivery."

Nix crossed the room, her knees still warm from muscle burn, her shoulders aching from the uphill climb out of the city. Usually she hitched rides by grabbing the fenders of outbound cars, but tonight the traffic had been light, made up of vehicles being turned away at the bridge barricade. All had raced by at full throttle, too fast to catch.

At least the muscle burn felt good. It was healthy pain, more bearable than the ache that lingered from hitting the pavement in Hobbs Way. Her shoulder spasmed as she crossed to the desk and picked up the package: cylindrical, fifteen inches tall, six inches around, wrapped in insulated Tyvek. It felt heavy and cold.

Bryan said, "The driver said he'd make it worth your while."

"How much does he think my while is worth?"

He told her.

She stuffed the package into her bag. Then she rounded his desk to stand beside him at the window. Across the river, intersections flashed with the lights of idling cruisers. Between the intersections, empty streets angled toward the city's western edge.

Bryan tapped the glass. "TV says the tremors were all west of Smithfield. Lots of people felt them. No one saw a thing."

Nix flexed her shoulders, reserving comment.

"And there's no damage." Bryan turned from the window. "This doctor on Channel Four thinks it's group hysteria, but the cops aren't taking any chances." His face caught the glow from his desk lamp as he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

leaned back against the glass. Spider veins limned his cheeks and nose. Dark circles rimmed his eyes. He looked tired. "I wouldn't ask you to do this if I thought there was — " He hesitated. "If I thought there was some kind of *incident* going on."

She tightened her straps. Even through the layers of nylon and spandex, the package felt cold against her shoulders. "So where's this package going?"

"Riverfront Hotel."

"Doesn't get much more 'downtown' than that. What's the suite number?"

"No suite."

"The room, then."

"No room. The client's renting the twenty-second floor. The night manager will take you up."

"What kind of man rents an entire floor?"

"A rich man." Bryan walked with her to the office door. "His name's Summit. First initial A. Middle initial J."

"A.J. Summit." The name rang of self-importance. It also seemed faintly familiar: not a name that she knew, but the echo of one.

"Been living at the Riverfront for two weeks. I hear he had the space remodeled to some weird specifications."

"How weird?"

"Didn't hear that. Just heard weird."

"Remodeled an entire floor?"

"Like I said, he's rich."

She glanced back at Bryan's office windows, toward the glowing hotel that stood on the city's western edge. The twenty-second floor was totally dark. She asked, "Did you inspect the package? If I get stopped, I'll be in enough trouble for just being in the city. I don't want to get busted for carrying contraband."

"It's nothing illegal, Nix."

She knew better than to question him further. Bryan lived by the dictum that a courier's concerns ended with *where* and *when*. Everything else was between management and client.

Bryan said, "The driver's already covered the delivery charges. Mr. Summit will pay you the rest in cash if you reach him by 9:00."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She checked her watch: 8:20. "Forty minutes to enter and cross a curfewed city?"

"You can do it."

"You want me to ride Hot Metal, don't you? I nearly killed myself last time."

"I'm not telling you how to get there." He turned back toward the window. "The package is due at the Riverfront by 9:00. The extra cash and how you collect it are your business."

Ellen's e-mail came with a single line and a 14,860 KB attachment. The line read: "There might be a thesis here." The attachment was titled "Alpha Tremors."

Nix started the download and then climbed into a hot shower. The water didn't calm her. She had reached the plateau of dull anxiety — a terrible state that stretched between chemical high and physical crash. She wished now that she had taken Ellen's advice about skipping the day's lectures.

She left the shower and returned to her computer. The attached document turned out to be a series of magazine and newspaper articles. Most of the datelines were from third-world countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, China, India. All of the articles were about sweatshops.

A picture scrolled into view. She took her finger from the arrow key, reading the headline above the digitized photo: "Work Continues as Workers Shake."

The photo showed a cavernous room packed with hunched children and ancient sewing machines. Cables dangled from a low ceiling. Bolts of fabric leaned against windowless walls. One of the workers grinned, revealing notched teeth that looked as if they were used for cutting thread. The caption read: *Sweatshop workers brace against phantom tremors in Bhiwandi, India.* She clicked a hyperlink, accessing an additional note:

> Tremors may originate in a nearby factory. Bhiwandi is the suspected home to at least one non-sleep shop.

The words shimmered. She rubbed her eyes and read them again, making sure. What the hell was a "non-sleep shop"?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She scrolled on, skimming the text, pausing at the photos. Many of the articles were from human rights publications. Most were in English. A few were in Hindi. Others were in languages she couldn't read, but these were partially translated in hyperlinks. She paused to reread one of them:

> The tremors are not earthquake related. Although reports in India were attributed to movement in the Kachchh Fault, what can we make of similar phenomena in non-seismic zones such as Malaysia?

She kept scrolling, reading with waning comprehension until the string of documents ended with a grainy, underexposed photograph.

She leaned forward, trying to focus. The image showed workers hunched over massive machines. One of the workers had his back to the camera. Something huge protruded from the base of his skull. The caption was in Chinese. She clicked the hyperlink translation:

> Photo purportedly taken in a non-sleep shop in the garment district of Zhongshan, China.

BRYAN'S HOME VANISHED in her rearview as she steered onto a sloping side street. Her return trip would avoid the main arteries that led up the side of Mt. Washington. Instead, she would stick to neighborhood streets and alleys that had been paved before city codes limited angles of descent.

Hurtling down a thirty-percent slope, past houses that all had first- and second-floor doors, she caught a glimpse of the south-shore valley and the old J&L Bridge. The span, once used for hauling hot metal, had been partially dismantled. Now it was little more than I-beams atop a corroded truss. She had ridden it before, but she'd been high on crystal meth. Could she ride it again, stone sober, powered by endorphins? She'd know soon enough.

The hillside alleys leveled toward the Southside's main arteries. She headed northeast, through the bright lights of Carson Street, angling into the narrow streets that had once been home to Europe's hungry and poor — exploited workers who had labored twelve-hour shifts at ten cents an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hour. Her paternal grandfather, a blind Irishman who'd lost one leg to the mill and the other to diabetes, had told her stories passed down from his father — epic nightmares of life in a lidless hell.

She cut down a cobble lane, past row houses with doors that opened directly into the street. Seconds later she emerged along the northern edge of a dismantled foundry — the ghost of a mill that had once stretched for 276 acres along both sides of the Monongahela. She veered left, toward a chain-link fence and a ragged hole large enough to accommodate a bike. She hunkered down and coasted through. Up ahead, the sooty walls of the old mill blocked her view of the river. Just as well. She didn't want to see the I-beams until she was on them. See them too soon and she might turn back....

Bryan's voice crackled in her headset. "See you, Nix. Looking good."

She kept pedaling, heading toward a gap in a boarded doorway. Through the opening — beyond a stretch of industrial darkness — another door opened toward a band of river lights.

"You're making good time, Nix. Keep this up, you'll be there before — " The headset filled with static as she entered the gutted mill. She knew the shortcut. She'd taken it before, but tonight there was something wrong with the darkness.

Beyond the glow of her headlamp, clotting shadows became bowed shoulders and withered hands. Shapes coalesced, forming rows of chugging machines, stretching deep in all directions, surrounding her with specters of industrial slavery. But these were not the enslaved immigrants of Pittsburgh industry. These ghosts were not making steel....

Pulsing needles thundered in the thinning darkness. She saw ancient sewing machines and workers in sandals and loose-fitting pants. And behind each bent figure, dangling from a hook on a metal pole, a bag of milky fluid dripped into a transparent tube.

She found herself focusing on an androgynous reed with bare breasts and close-cropped hair. It was a tiny man, bent and wasted. The feeding tube slipped over his shoulder and into a crusted shunt beneath a protruding clavicle. He was being fed intravenously.

On his head, he wore an elastic band that sagged behind his ears. And as he turned to drop a finished sleeve into a bag, Nix saw a second shunt protruding from the base of his skull. Cradled in elastic and Velcro, this

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

implant was larger and heavier than the one in his chest. Vapor condensed on its metal skin. A steel nipple extended from its base, connecting to a tube that ran into a pump box beside his chair. From the box, a second tube extended back to the base of the worker's skull.

She saw all of these things in an instant, absorbing them in a glance that ended when she noticed a calibrated panel in the pump box's side. Behind the panel, fluid collected in a graduated cylinder. It held her gaze. She couldn't look away. She felt herself falling....

WHAM!

She flew through an open doorway and hurtled toward a line of river lights. The wind felt unreal against her face. Where was she?

She landed and skidded on weedy gravel. Dust climbed around her shoes as she stopped and looked back. Inside the foundry, shadows fell from concrete pillars, crisscrossing beams, and dangling cables. The sweatshop had evaporated back into empty darkness. No emaciated workers. No drumming needles. No dripping tubes.

"Nix! Something wrong?"

Bryan's voice brought her back to the real. She reached for her transmitter. "Taking a breather." She had no desire to share the hallucination. "Everything's fine." Her therapists had warned her about flashbacks. Was that what she had just ridden though? A flashback? The belated effect of having spent too many amphetamine nights staring at photos of block-long sweatshops and researching the stats of enslaved lives?

"Clock's ticking, Nix."

She reoriented herself, feeling the wind on her face, the rubber grips against her palms, the dirt beneath her shoes. No time to puzzle over the ghosts of past addictions. No time for anything but riding. "Right!" She turned her bike and pushed off, steering onto the riprap at the base of the Hot Metal tracks. Then, with pedal-strapped shoes and bar-gripping hands, she pulled up on the bike, bunny hopped over a discarded rail, and landed on the back of an I-beam.

"I see you, Nix. Looking good."

Coasting, holding the handle steady with one hand, she reached for the transmitter and disengaged the headset. She did not need Bryan distracting her. This ride was between her and the bridge....

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She remembered the last time she had ridden the span. It had been the middle of a sleepless week, forty hours after disillusionment over her thesis had forced her out of school, five days before drug abuse had landed her in rehab. On that night there had been enough crystal meth in her veins to power a small borough, and Bryan's office had been full of couriers — all watching in amazement as she rode the beam.

But now she rode on cool nerves, following her helmet beam as it raced along the elevated strip of iron. The trick was to concentrate on moving ahead — not worrying about where she was, but concentrating on where she would be. The ride was easier without drugs. Clear vision kept her focused on the light. Controlled effort propelled her forward.

As the span ended, she braked and pivoted onto an eroded slope that angled along the bridge abutment. Her body flowed with the maneuvering bike — in balance, in control.

Ellen gave her the news over coffee in a Forbes Avenue Starbucks. It was official. The grant would not be renewed. "Your stipend runs through December, Nix. You can use the time to start your thesis."

"A thesis on alpha blasts?"

"Maybe. But don't call them alpha blasts. That wouldn't go over."

"What do I call them?"

"Nothing yet. But you and the test subjects felt something. You've got access to their exit interviews, the videos, the MEG scans. And there's your personal impressions. Something happened, and *you* felt it. If you can document it, you might encourage further inquiry."

"Into?"

Ellen grew serious. "Those documents I sent you were collected by a technician who spent eleven months doing peptide research in a Hong Kong lab. She left when she realized the applications for what she was doing."

"What was she doing?"

"Developing a process to inhibit sleep."

"Sounds like a noble cause."

"Until you consider the application."

Nix remembered the blurred photo from Zhongshan, China. "Non-sleep sweatshops?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ellen nodded. "Labor is a shop's least efficient component. Machines don't tire. Factories and warehouses don't close. Only people need time off to recharge."

"You think that's a good thing, biological downtime?"

"It's a natural thing."

"So is hunting and gathering, but who does that?" Nix eased back from the table, turning toward the stream of morning traffic beyond the café windows. Her bike sat by the door, waiting to carry her to a morning interview at a place called Hilltop Couriers. If she got the job, there was a chance she could afford to stay in school once her stipend ran out. "Funny thing," she said, staring into the angled light. "I used to ride for fun. Cross-country. BMX. No time for that now." She looked back at Ellen. "Now everything's work."

"Shouldn't be that way."

"But it is." She studied Ellen's face, trying to read between the gentle lines. The woman had mastered the aspect of a clinical psychologist, but beneath the detachment Nix detected a stratum of guarded caution.

"Listen, Nix. What if lack of sleep posed a danger, not just to the people who didn't sleep, but to the people around them as well?"

"That's nothing new. ABS causes — "

"I'm not talking about sleeping drivers." Ellen leaned forward. "What if the tremors you felt in the lab were only weak versions of a more disruptive phenomenon?"

"Disruptive where? Egypt? Malaysia? Who's going to care about that? You said it yourself, Ellen. The world's changed. No one cares about workers' rights, and alpha blasts aren't exactly the third-world disturbances that are making news these days."

"If the proof existed, people might listen."

"Maybe. But would they be the right people?"

"Who are the right people, Nix?"

"The people in a position to affect change. Shop owners, for example. What do they care about tremors if they've got a maximized workforce? And the workers, what about them? More job time means more income. They're not going to give that up. I know I wouldn't."

Ellen didn't answer right away. For a moment she sat, digesting the words, looking thoughtful. Her days of wild hypotheses and reckless

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

investigation were behind her. She could not afford to investigate alpha blasts and non-sleep sweatshops even if she wanted to. And despite the forced calm of her face, her eyes made it clear that she wanted to. At last, she said. "It's a thesis topic, Nix. You could do worse."

"I'll think it over."

"Do."

Nix started to stand, paused when Ellen seemed ready to say something more. But the moment passed in silence, with only a soft change in the woman's expression. It was a subtle change, but Nix caught it. And with it she glimpsed the truth beneath the surface. Intuitively, Nix realized that the Hong Kong technician had not been one of Ellen's associates. "All right," Nix said. "I'll think it over. I'll let you know."

The technician had been Ellen.

THE WHARF STRETCHED beneath rusting trestles, following the curve of the river toward a pedestrian tunnel that had long ago become home to a tribe of hardcore urchins and transient runaways. They all knew Nix, and usually they let her pass without comment. Tonight, however, they were gone — either routed by cops, or (more likely) watching from the city's shadows while the police puzzled over phantom tremors. Their cardboard beds and trash-bagged possessions flashed in her headlamp's glow as she pedaled on.

Up ahead, a red-and-blue haze spilled across the tunnel's end. The police were out there, positioned on Commonwealth Place. But even if they looked toward the tunnel, what would they see? A blur of shadow? A silent streak vanishing into the dark expanse of Point State Park? If they called to her, she would keep moving. If they gave chase, she would lose them on secret trails that diverged from the paved walkways. And if they caught her, she would be no worse off than if she hid in the tunnel and waited for a better plan. She had eight minutes to get to A. J. Summit. She had to keep moving.

Pedaling furiously, she left the tunnel, traversed a twenty-foot courtyard, and crashed through a curtain of broken shrubs. She shifted to a power gear, jumped a ditch of muddy runoff, and coasted up a wedge of gritty earth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Another wall of shrubs blocked her path. She braced, stayed the course, and crashed through onto a sloping berm. Almost there. The hotel's west face loomed before her.

Ellen looked up as Nix blew into her office.

"I've got like five minutes." Nix threw her helmet on the floor and slumped into a chair. "What did you think?" The tiny office filled with a soft metronomic tapping — muffled beats like pulsing pistons. "Did you get my first draft? Did you read it?"

Ellen turned from her computer screen. "Yes." She looked concerned. "I read it."

"And?"

"Honestly?"

Nix sat forward. "Christ!" The tapping grew louder. "You didn't like it?"

"It's not the draft." Ellen set her glasses on the desk. "The draft is promising. Some good analysis of the MEG data. Nice handling of the exit interviews...."

"So what's the problem?"

Again, she asked, "Honestly?"

"Yeah." Nix glanced at her watch. "I've got like four minutes. Hit me."

"All right, Nix." Ellen paused. For a moment, she too seemed to be listening to the phantom tapping. "No bullshit, Nix. I'll give it to you straight. You look like hell."

"Me?"

"What do you weigh? Ninety pounds?"

"Ninety-six."

"That's what, ten percent underweight?"

"I'm small-boned."

"You're five-eight, Nix. And you're losing muscle."

"I'm riding full time. How can I be — ?"

"Still taking amphetamines?"

The tapping grew louder, filling the room.

"I thought we were going to talk about my thesis."

"We did, Nix. It's a good start, but you'll never finish it if you keep wearing yourself down."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nix looked at her watch.

"What's going on, Nix? Where do you have to be that's so important?"

"Work."

"Your shift's over."

"First one's over. I'm doing a second. Just for today, to cover the rent." She picked up her helmet. "Tell you what, can you e-mail me? Tell me what I need to do — with the thesis, I mean. Just the thesis. Tell me. I'll do it." She stood. The thumping stopped. She looked down. The sound had been coming from her feet: Automatic Behavior Syndrome. She had left the bike outside, but her feet had kept on riding.

She steered toward the hotel's service entrance where she locked her bike in the shadow of a dumpster. Then she rounded the building's southwest corner and stepped out into the blazing headlights of three idling busses. People climbed aboard, looking tired and anxious as bellhops loaded their bags. What did this mean? Was the hotel being evacuated?

She pushed through the crowd and into the lobby.

At the main desk, the night manager spoke into a telephone, the receiver wedged between his ear and shoulder. He sorted receipts as he worked the phone: two tasks at once, the bane of frontline management.

The clock behind him gave a muffled tick: 8:55.

She stepped toward the desk. "Hey!" She slapped the counter with her gloved palm. "Hilltop Couriers."

He looked up. His eyes had the same red-rimmed glare that she often saw in Bryan's. To the phone, he said, "One moment." Then, to Nix: "Excuse me?"

She unstrapped her pack. "From Hilltop Couriers." The pack thumped the desk. "Delivery for Mr. Summit."

His brow buckled. "Delivery?"

"For A. J. Summit." She glanced toward the busses. "He still here? My dispatcher said you'd show me up."

Again, to the phone: "Right back." He stabbed the hold button and dropped the receiver. "Sorry." He brushed a hand against his high forehead, straightening the memory of a forelock. "Can't take you up, but I can show you the way." He turned and took a set of keys from the wall behind

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him. "Follow me." He swung the keys around his thumb, catching them in his palm. "I thought downtown was closed to incoming traffic." He looked back at her as he walked. "It been reopened?"

"No." Her tone let him know that she didn't want to go into it.

He walked on, leading her to a service elevator where he pushed a key into a battered panel. The grate opened. "It's the only way to get to twenty-two. Other than the stairs, of course. And you wouldn't want to take them."

She stepped inside as he pulled the key from the panel. "The regular elevators will bring you back down. They just don't carry passengers up there. You know. For privacy."

The grate closed. He spoke to her through the bars. "I'd take you up, but I can't leave my post. We're moving some guests uptown, out of the curfew area. Right now it's voluntary, but the cops say everyone's got to go if those rumbles start again." He swung the keys. "You might mention that to Mr. Summit. He won't like being moved, but if the cops insist — "

"I'll tell him." She looked at the rows of buttons on the elevator wall. "This like a normal elevator? I just hit the button for twenty-two?"

"That's it."

She hit the button.

The elevator lurched and started to move.

Subj:Your Thesis
Date:1/17/02
From:Dr. Ellen Slater <eslater>
To:Gati Imbel <nix55>

Nix:

Attached document contains my comments. As I said, you've produced a good first draft, a respectable start, but I'm concerned about your lack of support for the existence of non-sleep sweatshops. More problematic, your so-called "dream solution" (top management becoming concerned with the health and well-being of low-level workers) is unrealistic. You said it yourself a few months ago. Those who can affect change need a compelling reason to listen. Without

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one, I'm afraid the concluding argument breaks down. A thesis is no place for "dream solutions."

HE TRIED reconnecting her headset as the clattering cables pulled her upward, but to her surprise the jack was still in the transmitter. A broken wire dangled from its end. She had evidently snapped it while riding the bridge, broken it when all she'd meant to do was pull the plug. Bryan was going to be pissed.

She removed her helmet, then the headset. The latter was merely an earplug and a pinhead mic, held in place with a Velcro band. She wrapped the broken wire around the Velcro and dropped the unit into her helmet.

The floors scrolled by, rolling like an image on a badly tuned monitor: a succession of door-lined halls, then a utility floor of steel beams and humming compressors, then eleven more floors of rooms until the car emerged into a foyer smelling of fresh paint and plaster.

The grate opened. Nix pressed the button to send the car back down. Then she stepped out, advancing toward a wood-veneer door.

Near the ceiling, a camera glared with an LED eye. To its left, a voice buzzed from a half-inch speaker. "You're the courier?"

"Yes."

The elevator clattered behind her, slipping away on groaning pulleys. It was then that she realized something was missing from the foyer.

The night manager had told her to use one of the regular elevators when she wanted to leave. But there were no such elevators here. There was only the service elevator's grate-covered shaft, the wood-veneer door, the camera, the speaker, and the buzzing voice: "You have my package?"

"Yes."

The door clicked, disengaging from its frame.

She pushed inward. Squinting as intense light spilled from the room.

Again, the voice spoke, coming to her first through the speaker, and then, a quarter second later, from somewhere deep within the light: "Hurry." ["*Hurry.*"]

The entire level had been gutted, walls and fixtures carted away until all that remained was an orchard of widely spaced pipes and beams — all illuminated by a powerful glow.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Across the space, dwarfed by distance, a man leaned before a fluorescent wall. He seemed strangely deformed: shapeless body, diminutive head, reed-like hands. Beside him, stretching across a raised iridescent plane, stood a line of puzzling objects: a rhombic rectangle, a suspended teardrop, and an empty fishbowl balanced atop a glass pedestal. The tableau resembled something from a Richard Powers painting — futuristic images from the mid-twentieth century.

Nix stepped onto the raised floor, a grid of Plexiglas panels illuminated from below. The ceiling was much the same. And so were the walls: rows of fluorescent tubes behind translucent sheets. All the windows had been covered, blocking out the night, holding in the glare. "You A. J. Summit?"

"I am."

The room extended for nearly a city block — 400 feet of glowing void.

She moved forward, advancing between the exposed pipes and beams. Deprived of their shadows, they resembled paper cutouts — two-dimensional artifacts against a blinding backdrop.

Mr. Summit condensed from the glow as she moved toward him. She saw that his misshapen shoulders were actually the lumpy folds of an oversized saffron robe. His head, shaved from crown to chin, held a face that was at once agitated and exhausted. Like the pipes and beams, his robe-draped body cast no shadow — nor did the few necessities that stood behind him: a white cot, a silver footlocker, and a sink and commode that grew like porcelain tubers from tangled pipes. Forty feet beyond the fixtures, white walls formed a floor-to-ceiling partition large enough to hold a stairwell and a bank of elevators. An oblong seam intimated the presence of a door.

Summit stepped forward, gesturing toward her bag. "Is that my package?" He spoke with the precise accent of an Oxford don, but there was also a lilting hesitance, as if the English had been acquired as a second language.

She tugged the zipper and removed the cylinder. "And I was told you'd have something for me."

"It is there." He pointed to the iridescent plane that stretched beside him. She saw now that it was a transparent table. Along the top, the three mysterious objects proved to be a wafer-thin computer screen, a crystal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

decanter, and a brandy snifter. And there was a fourth object — an envelope with an open flap.

"The envelope is yours." He reached toward her. "And that cylinder is mine." His fingers brushed hers as he took the package. His hands felt cold, wet. They trembled. She knew the symptoms. Junkie hands.

She put her helmet on the table and picked up the envelope. She looked inside. The first bill was a hundred. So was the one under it. She ran her thumb along the edges. Ten bills. "There's a thousand dollars here."

"Yes." He drew a delicate knife from the pocket of his robe. "Is that a problem?"

"It's more than I expected."

"Then you will stay." It wasn't a question.

"Stay?"

"To help." He pulled his knife through the package. A faint mist rose from the incision. He peeled back the lid, looked inside, then placed the package on the desk. His hands trembled. "You must help me." He pushed it toward her, the top now cut away. Something shone within. "I am not able to do it." He raised his hands — withered, trembling. "Take it out for me. Please."

She folded the thousand-dollar envelope and slipped it into her bag. Then she stepped forward, reached into the package, and lifted out a stainless-steel cylinder. Moisture beaded on its sides, collecting around her fingers as she set it on the table.

"Dispose of that, please." He pointed to the empty package. "I do not like clutter."

She crumpled the insulated Tyvek and stuffed it into her bag.

"And now this." He turned to the stainless-steel cylinder. "Open it, please." He slipped into a padded chair, settling into the groan of pneumatic supports.

She gripped the stainless-steel lid, twisting till it came loose in a jet of dark mist.

"And pour it, please." He pushed a trembling hand toward the crystal decanter. "You must pour it into here. It needs to warm before I can drink it."

She set the lid on the table. A corona of mist formed at its base, spreading in white rays across the Lucite.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But carefully, please. It mustn't be agitated once it is open."

A black stream slipped from the cylinder as she tilted it toward the decanter. The stream fell silently, fanning as it struck the crystal bottom.

"I usually have my attendant pour it. He took my car to the airport, to pick up the package. When he tried to return, the police would not let him back into the city."

She barely heard him. Her attention was on the decanter and the black thread that poured through its cut-glass sides. One moment it resembled a liquid. Then it looked like falling sand — fine as onyx dust. But mostly it looked like nothing, a void, a gap in the physical world. She felt herself falling, as if the negative space within the crystal were compounding her exhaustion.

"Careful! You are spilling it!"

She straightened up. Before her, a teaspoon of blackness turned to vapor on the Lucite. "Sorry." The cylinder gave a hollow thump as she returned it to the table. "I'll wipe it up."

"No. Let it go. It evaporates quickly." He pointed to the snifter while the spilled blackness vanished into thready mist. "Pour some into there."

She raised the decanter, held it to the glass, and poured three fingers of icy void. Vapor rose, filling the snifter's bowl.

"Bring it to me."

The front of his monitor came into view as she rounded the desk. A pinhead microphone and crystal speaker lay embedded in the plastic frame. Below them, a flat screen glowed with colors undimmed by the surrounding glare. She realized that she was looking at a piece of high-end technology — a wafer-thin screen of incredible brilliance. Upon its surface, images stood stacked like comic-book panels. One frame held a grid of touch-activated icons. Another showed the empty foyer that she had passed through moments before. Each of the others displayed live-action video, rectangles crammed with emaciated workers and pounding machines.

He took the snifter from her hand, cupping it in his palms as she stared at the screen.

"These people." She pointed toward the video images. Fitted with shunts, feeding tubes, and catheters, each figure resembled the blurred silhouette from Zhongshan, China. They also recalled the specters she had seen while pedaling through the Southside foundry.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At the base of each shaved head, a large implant lay cradled in a nest of Velcroed elastic. "Are they working for you?"

He didn't answer.

She turned toward him, studying him through the glare. His features looked faintly Indian. She considered his name: A. J. Summit. She had known many Indians who adjusted their names, modifying pronunciation and spelling to appeal to western ears and eyes. *Sandhya* became *Sandy*. *Samir* became *Sam*. *Neelish* became *Neil*. Those with names like *Gati* had to be more creative, but the practice was common enough to make her doubt the authenticity of *A. J. Summit*.

What if the initials weren't initials? Not *A. J.*, but *Ajay*. And what of the last name? Lose an *m* and you had *Sumit*. She knew that name. *Ajay Sumit*. She had seen it while researching fabrication plants in western India....

She asked the question again. "These people...are they working in your factories?"

"Yes." He pressed the snifter to his chest, steadying his hands as they warmed the drink. "They must look ghastly to you — all those tubes. But the procedure is actually a good thing, part of an adjustment that allows each worker to triple his income." He lowered his face, pressing his nose to the vapor that gathered below the snifter's rim. He inhaled. The mist rose, swirling into his nostrils.

She watched him, realizing that she was standing before the Holy Grail of her abandoned thesis. Ajay Sumit, the shadowy presence behind a propagation of non-sleep sweatshops.

Her heart knotted. "Those IV tubes." She winced, feeling the anxious exhaustion from halfway around the world. "You're giving these people drugs to keep them awake."

"No. Not giving. Removing. Those tubes are extracting peptides. Endogenous narcotics. The chemicals of natural sleep. They can be separated from the blood and spinal fluid. Someday, we hope to market them — make them available to people who can afford to savor the luxury of organic oblivion." Again, he put his face to the snifter, but this time he didn't inhale the vapor. This time he pressed his lips to the rim, raised his hands, and downed the liquid.

She watched in disgust as he lowered the glass.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

His lips trembled, turning blue around his misting breath. "Our chemists haven't perfected the liqueur. There are problems. They've advised me not to drink it, but it's the only way I can sleep." He pushed the snifter into her hand. "More, please."

She backed away.

"Please. I need another."

She returned the snifter to the table. "I want no part of this."

"I've paid you."

"Some things don't have a price."

"Everything has a price!" He gripped the sides of his chair, composing himself as he held her gaze. "The workers have agreed to the procedure. They embrace it." He glanced at the screen. "They stay on for days...weeks at a time."

"I imagine you have quite a waiting list, workers standing in line, ready to snatch any vacancy."

"Yes. It's a terrific windfall."

"For whom?"

"Everyone. Management gets a maximized workforce. Labor gets a living wage."

"And sleep becomes a value-added byproduct?"

"No. Not yet. It's still in development. I shouldn't have started drinking it. Now I can't stop."

"Can't or won't?"

"I can't expect you to understand."

"Try me."

His mouth quivered, poised between continuing his story and commanding her to refill the snifter.

"You might be surprised how much I can understand." She held his gaze. "I might even be able to help you."

"You can help me by pouring the drink."

"That's not the help you need."

"There's no other help. No other escape." He turned toward the screen. "They've been chasing me for months. Bombay, Hong Kong, London — wherever I hide, they come. I thought that by watching them there — " He pointed to the screen. "I thought that the satellite feed might provide hints of when they were coming for me, but they just keep

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

working — on and on, with no warning until I feel their thunder. That's when I know I have to run. But no more. I'm through running. This time I stay where I am." He looked at the empty snifter. "Tonight I'll hide in their sleep, their deep sleep — beyond reality, beyond dreams."

She looked at the screen. "How can they come for you if they're working?"

"It isn't their bodies that come. It's something else — gathering shadows...booming darkness."

"And what will these shadows do when they find you sleeping?"

"I don't know. I don't *want* to know. If I'm sleeping, I *won't* know." He reached for the decanter. "Please. Help me. I'll spill it if I pour it myself. I'll pay you more if you want. Name your price, just pour it before — "

Nix's bones quivered with a welling tremor that seemed to spill from somewhere beyond the gutted space. Floor and ceiling panels remained fixed within their frames. The crystal decanter and delicate snifter stood as before, unmoved atop the Lucite table.

Ajay Sumit gripped his chair's padded arms as the tremors rolled through him. "They're here." He turned to Nix. "They've found me." The pits of his eyes were impossibly black, like the stuff in the decanter: a total void, the absence of color, the negation of the physical world.

The rumble came again. Nix steadied herself on the table and turned toward the door that led to the service elevator. "Coming closer."

He grinned, a forced twisting of the lips. "I suspect it's been causing confusion in the city. Explosions without fire, without smoke. The police should consider themselves lucky, don't you think?" He looked at her. "How lucky for them that they don't see what we see?"

"What *we* see?"

"You've seen the gathering shadows. I can tell. They've left their stain in your eyes."

It came once more: the tingling crackle, the quivering roar. She turned, looking through the glare, toward the closed door that led to the service elevator. And now she realized the reason for the vast, glowing room. For a man who fears an invasion of shadows, light is a tireless sentry. He had ripped out the walls, giving himself clear view of his shadowless domain. Darkness would not surprise him here.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He leaned against the Lucite, reaching toward the decanter. Perhaps he had resigned himself to pouring it on his own. Or maybe he intended to guzzle it unwarmed, straight from the crystal. Either way, she had to stop him. She stepped forward, picked up the decanter, and backed away.

"Please." His hands clenched on empty air. "Pour it for me. I'll pay you anything you want. I'll — " His eyes focused on something behind her.

She turned, looking back along the line of his gaze.

Across the room, a thread of darkness condensed in the glowing air. It fanned like spewing mist, expanding into advancing waves.

She asked, "What is it?"

"The shadows of their dreams." He glanced at the monitor. "I took their sleep. I left their dreams."

Misty tendrils coalesced into human forms. Gaunt and emaciated, they pushed forward — shrouding the light as they spilled over the glowing panels.

He kept staring at the monitor, peering into the stacked frames full of hunched bodies and pounding needles. "See! No change! They just keep working. On and on."

In the center of the room, the advancing forms solidified until they resembled the racing bodies that she had followed into Hobbs Way. They crossed the room, fanning out as they approached the Lucite table. Ajay Sumit sat rigid as they flowed around him. He gripped his chair with trembling hands. Afraid to move. Unable to speak.

Nix turned in place, scanning the dark faces, gnarled hands, bleeding shunts — the dream images of people trapped in a waking nightmare. As one, they raised their withered arms. Empty hands clenched and opened, clenched and opened. Nix felt the heavy coldness in her own hands, and she realized what she had to do.

She stepped toward them.

Sumit coughed, finding his voice. "What are you doing?"

She held out her hands, offering the decanter to a child with vacant eyes.

The springs of Sumit's chair gasped as he rose. On the edge of her vision, Nix saw his hand blur toward her — but he was too late. The child's hands were already on the crystal...and Nix was already letting go.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No!" Sumit's roar echoed as Nix released the decanter. What happened next was something she should have expected — something she should have realized even before her fingers drew back from the delicate crystal: the phantom workers were no more substantial than tendrils of mist. The decanter slipped through the child's hands, tumbled through shaded air, and shattered against the floor.

Sumit grabbed Nix's shoulder. She pulled free, stepping back as the liqueur spread across the panels, forming a blackened starburst that sputtered and foamed atop the fluorescent glow. And it was then, as the evaporating mist rose through the shades of errant dreams, that the shadowy shapes changed one last time.

Sumit covered his eyes, but Nix kept staring — watching as the skeletal arms became streamers. Faces angled into geometric rays. Chaos became symmetry. Colors bloomed from dirty shadows. For a moment, the transformed figures fused with the mist from the evaporating liqueur. The air filled with rings and ovals and braided swirls — a mandala condensing out of the merging mist and shadow. And then, with an alpha blast that rang deep in Nix's soul, the beauty exploded into streamers of light.

"They weren't coming for you." She spoke without turning, staring at the empty air that hung above the shattered crystal. "Only to make you give up what you'd taken."

She heard the sigh of pneumatic supports as Sumit collapsed into his chair. "God!" He spoke it more as a prayer than a curse: soft, breathy, full of awe. She turned to find him staring at the monitor. Within the stacked frames, workers continued to slave over clattering machines. "And still they work," he whispered.

And then she heard the footsteps. Muffled. Coming closer. Rising through the partitioned stairwell forty feet away....

The partition door flew open. Firefighters appeared, spilling into the room like a yellow wave. They hurried toward Sumit and Nix. "Everyone out!" Their boots squeaked on the Lucite panels as they advanced through the bright emptiness.

Sumit touched the screen. The display went dark. He lifted the monitor, folding the base so that it became a protective cover. His hands

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

no longer trembled. Now his movements appeared sluggish — almost drugged — as if the single drink had begun to take effect. Nevertheless, his eyes flashed as he turned to Nix. "Tell no one." His voice assumed a harsh whisper as he tucked the closed monitor beneath his arm. "I'll pay you."

So that was it. He wouldn't stop here. He would continue as before — exploiting the workers, robbing their sleep, and, when necessary, appeasing their errant dreams with spilled liqueur. And now, to keep things neat, he intended to buy her silence, as if her integrity had a price.

"I'll contact you," he said. "Through the courier office. I'll make it worth your — "

"Now, people!" Two firefighters grabbed Sumit's arms, leading him toward the stairs.

Another took hold of Nix. "You a courier?"

"Yes." She grabbed her helmet as he pulled her toward the door.

"You delivered something?"

Sumit glanced back.

She held Sumit's gaze and said, "I'm sorry." She looked him dead on. Then, turning to the firefighter, "It was a package. He asked me to open it." She looked back toward the shattered glass on the floor. "There was a decanter inside, but I jumped when I felt the tremor. I dropped it. It shattered." Again, she glanced toward Sumit. "I'm sorry. It must have been very expensive."

He smiled as if he forgave her, but she saw his expression for what it was — a conspirator's grin. She had taken his offer. Like everything else in his world, her silence could be bought.

THEY WOULDN'T LET her retrieve her bike. Instead, they whisked her through the lobby and onto a bus full of frazzled guests. Airbrakes sighed. The bus lurched forward, only to stop again as a black limousine cut across its path. She sensed that Ajay Sumit was inside that sleek black car, riding alone, perhaps asleep in the folds of his saffron robe, temporarily safe within a private darkness....

She had once spoken to Ellen about the futility of railing against non-sleep sweatshops, an assessment that Ellen had echoed when Nix had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tried ending her thesis with a carelessly thin "dream solution." Change could never be effected unless the people in power had an incentive to listen.

But now someone in power could be given that incentive. Ajay Sumit, temporarily safe in his stolen sleep, would awake to find that the price of Nix's silence was the adoption of her dream.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

HUCKLEBERRY FINN AND *HEART OF DARKNESS* are two classic stories with rivers running through them. Next month's cover story also features a river through the heart of it...but that's about where the similiarities end. Gary Shockley's imagination runs riot in "The Lightning Bug Wars," which presents us with a man on a raft and his very strange and haunting trip.

Speaking of haunting, we also expect to bring you "The Haunting" next month, a new story by Joyce Carol Oates. This short piece concerns a young girl, her older brother, and the basement of their new house...and perhaps a secret or two.

We've also got new stories waiting in the wings by writers whose names you might not know (Alan Michaud, for instance, and Bret Bertholf for another) but whose work you won't forget. And then there are stories by writers with more familiar names: Robert Sheckley, Adam-Troy Castro, Jack Cady, John Kessel. There might even be a special issue in the works. Subscribe now and you'll be sure to get all the goods.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy&ScienceFiction MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. 96 page Catalog. $5.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

ELFEN GOLD, a fantasy by Sheri L. McGathy–Available online from New Concepts Publishing, *www.newconceptspublishing.com/elfengold.htm*

TIMESHIFT TRILOGY: A unique new time travel series *www.scifi-jackson.com*

CRANK! magazine—back issues available. Le Guin, Fintushel, Lethem. Write Broken Mirrors Press, PO Box 1110, New York, NY 10159-1110.

THE ANTHONY BOUCHER CHRONICLES, ed. by Francis M. Nevins, Jr. Mystery reviews and articles from 1942-1947. Books 1 and 2 of the trilogy are available from Ramble House. Book 3 coming this summer. *http://www.ramblehouse.bigstep.com/* 318-868-8727.

William Hope Hodgson THE HOUSE ON THE BORDERLAND. Edgar Allan Poe THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM. Limited collectors' editions of these enduring masterpieces. Cloth only. $ 24.95. Available from the publisher: *http://www.coppensfrenks.nl/*

14-time Hugo nominee. The New York Review of Science Fiction. *www.nyrsf.com* Reviews and essays. $3.50 or $32 for 12 issues, checks only. Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570.

The Burden of Indigo signed by Gene O'Neill $15 ppd. 236 Stonecrest, Napa, CA 94558

A demon warrior's quest to destroy the source of evil. *Swords of Destiny. http://www.swordsofdestiny.com* 1-888-280-7715.

Cat in Glass by Nancy Etchemendy—see *www.cricketbooks.net* for publisher's discount.

Snugglarea by Dan Weiss: "Mix of early Vonnegut and Edgar Allan Poe. Very funny...serious criticism of modernity." (*Midwest Book Review*). $11.49 Black Plankton Press, PO Box 1351, Cobb, CA 95426 bplankton@juno.com

Beyond the Time Machine, by Burt Libe, sequel to *The Time Machine. http://us.geocities.com/BTTM_Book*

Special Dec. 1990 Stephen King issue of *F&SF* - only $15.00 ppd. F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

Small-press authors! Get the word out with a classified ad in *F&SF!*

SLAUGHTERHOUSE 5, CATTLE 0. The great *F&SF* contests are collected in *Oi, Robot*, edited by Edward L. Ferman. $11.95 postpaid from F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

MISCELLANEOUS

AUDIOBOOKS. Niven, LeGuin, Willis, Baxter, Egan, etc. *www.audiotexttapes.com.*

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK. IVY HOUSE PUBLISHING GROUP. All Subjects Considered. 1-800-948-2786, *www.ivyhousebooks.com*

PLASTIC MODELS: Space, Sci-Fi, tv, movies, etc. Free catalog, also buying/trading. Green's, Dept. FSF, Box 55787, Riverside, CA 92517. (909) 684-5300; (800) 807-4759; Fax (909) 684-8819; *fsf@greenmodels.com*; *www.greenmodels.com*

F&SF classifieds work because the cost is low: only $1.50 per word (minimum of 10 words). 10% discount for 6 consecutive insertions, 15% for 12. You'll reach 100,000 high-income, highly educated readers each of whom spends hundreds of dollars a year on books, magazines, games, collectibles, audio and video tapes. Send copy and remittance to: F&SF Market Place, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CURIOSITIES

THE BIRDS, BY FRANK BAKER (1936)

LONDON-born Frank Baker (1908-1982) wrote *The Birds*, an unjustly neglected "Ohmigod, we're living between two World Wars!" fable, published a few years after *Brave New World* and *The Shape of Things to Come*. It shares little more than a basic premise with Daphne du Maurier's same-titled 1952 short story, or the 1963 Hitchcock film adaptation.

Anna, the heroine, is told about the Days Before the Birds Came Fifty Years Ago by her dying father, who had watched the first mass bird attack on human beings in Trafalgar Square, London, where the avian menace usually comes from panhandling pigeons. He recalls feeling "a dread sense of the mock-world we had set up in place of the real world which was our heritage."

Baker shows how the birds, red in beak and claw, rectify what W. S. Gilbert called Nature's sole mistake — Man. But don't expect too much blood and guts. *The Birds* is an *angst*-ridden, episodic, idea-as-hero novel in which the meekest people survive to inherit a born-again Earth.

He had some thirty-years-after thoughts, which might have been written this very afternoon: "[The world of 1935] differs little from ours of today, except that now there are many more people and the rat-race is swifter. But the birds are too swift. If they came today they would, I hope, be even more alert to the horrors which devil our present society."

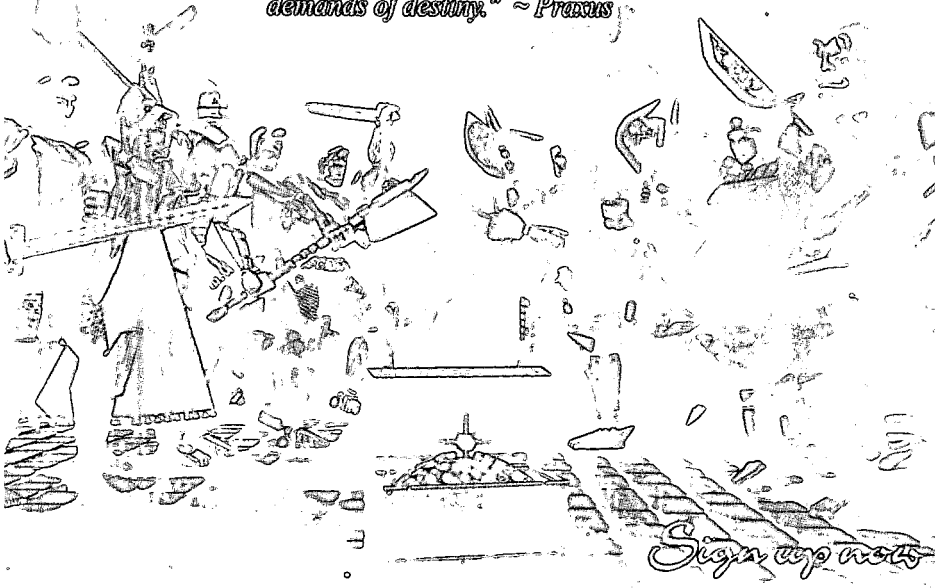
But *The Birds* isn't all neurasthenic plume and doom. Spot the dictator: "...a small bird flew over his head, casting his load with a gentle plop onto the carefully brushed black hair."

—Graham Andrews

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rubies of Eventide

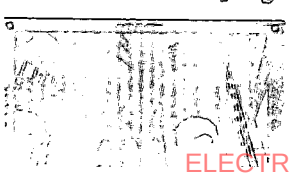
"The strands of fate are held in mortal hands. Only they can rise above the demands of destiny." ~ Praxus

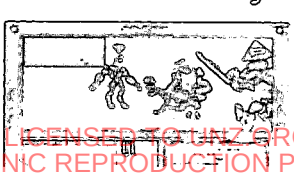


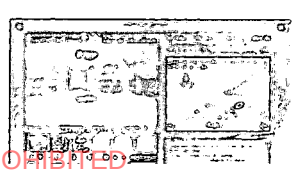
Sign up now

- Unique Combat System
- Open Skill System Allows Unique Characters
- Seven Races, Sixteen Classes
- Roleplaying is Encouraged and Rewarded
- Immersive History and Culture
- Dozens of Skills, Hundreds of Spells

1800play - cwi www.rubiesofeventide.com







LICENSED TO URZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bargain Back Issue Sale

We must clear out some back issues, which gives you an opportunity to stock up on lots of great reading at bargain prices. These issues, all in excellent condition, range from early 1990s to the beginning of the new century. For a limited time they are available for only $12.00 for six different back issues or $20.00 for twelve (plus $4.00 postage). Foreign addresses please add $4.00 per order. Send order to:

Fantasy & Science Fiction PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

❒ Send me 6 different back issues of F&SF . I enclose $12.00

❒ Send me 12 back issues for $20.00 plus $4.00 postage = $24.00
(Foreign address? Please add $4.00 per order)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

St/Zip _____

We cannot fill orders for specific issues (write for free list of these or see our Web site: www.fsfmag.com) Allow 3 weeks for delivery in the US.

Fantasy & Science Fiction PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED